PLAYING THE CRISIS: VIDEO GAMES AND
THE MOBILIZATION OF ANXIETY AND DESIRE

BY

ROBERT MEJIA

DISSERTATION
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Doctoral Committee:
Professor Kent A. Ono, Chair
Professor John Nerone
Professor Clifford Christians
Professor Robert A. Brookey, Northern Illinois University
ABSTRACT

This is a critical cultural and political economic analysis of the video game as an engine of global anxiety and desire. Attempting to move beyond conventional studies of the video game as a thing-in-itself, relatively self-contained as a textual, ludic, or even technological (in the narrow sense of the word) phenomenon, I propose that gaming has come to operate as an epistemological imperative that extends beyond the site of gaming in itself. Play and pleasure have come to affect sites of culture and the structural formation of various populations beyond those conceived of as belonging to conventional gaming populations: the workplace, consumer experiences, education, warfare, and even the practice of politics itself, amongst other domains. Indeed, the central claim of this dissertation is that the video game operates with the same political and cultural gravity as that ascribed to the prison by Michel Foucault. That is, just as the prison operated as the discursive site wherein the disciplinary imaginary was honed, so too does digital play operate as that discursive site wherein the ludic imperative has emerged.

To make this claim, I have had to move beyond the conventional theoretical frameworks utilized in the analysis of video games. Though I am indeed indebted to these popular traditions of textual, ludic, and platform analysis, too often, I argue, they work to delimit the domain of the video game form, thereby obscuring our ability to grasp the “non-gaming” political force of digital play. Hence, the first two chapters operate to develop the historical perspective and theoretical framework needed for understanding how digital play has come to operate beyond the confines of conventional gaming. In establishing this rough historical perspective and theoretical framework, I am indebted to the best of what game studies has to offer, as well as to the works of James Carey, Michel Foucault, Paul Virilio, and Raymond Williams, for their conceptions of technologies as cultural practices that operate to codify the particular formation of various
populations. If I am successful, my hope is that this dissertation might operate as part of an emerging tradition of critical game studies scholarship, willing to take seriously the totality of digital play. In this vein, I see my work as operating alongside the recent and ongoing works of Ergin Bulut, Patrick Crogan, Nick Dyer-Witheford, Aphra Kerr, Stephen Kline, Greig de Peuter, Roger Stahl, and others.

My contribution, then, to this emergent field of critical game studies is that the video game form has come to operate as an engine of global anxiety in terms of its political economic, environmental, military, social, and cultural processes. Gaming practices carry with them a political and cultural gravity that has worked to mobilize various economic and military sectors, and though this has enriched some, so too has it brought about horrific results for various laboring populations, regional ecologies, and those on the wrong end of the militarized border. To those who might be turned away by the prospect of such a pessimistic take on the history and state of contemporary gaming politics, understand that I am neither a luddite nor an outsider to the gaming industry. I was born in 1982, and remember fondly looking forward to each new issue of *Nintendo Power* so that I might have the latest news on the most exciting upcoming games. Even today, I am implicated in that my gaming collection is possibly more vast than most, and I would argue passionately that Óscar Araujo and Nobuo Uematsu are amongst the most beautiful music composers, and that Hideo Kojima and Soraya Saga are amongst the greatest storytellers. And yet, as beautiful, inspiring, and moving as gaming can be, there is much that is horrific, revolting, and terrible about the industry as well. We cannot smile with good conscious at the pleasures afforded for us through the experience of digital play and simultaneously remain ignorant of the significant suffering undertaken on our behalf. It is my hope that this dissertation is a move towards good conscious.
To Jennifer Ann House, for her constant reminder that

intellectuals are the dominant group’s “deputies,”

and whose love compels me to act otherwise.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a dissertation is hard. It is intellectually, physically, and emotionally draining. Though research of any kind is often a labor of love, love is not enough. During the course of writing this dissertation I struggled with my insecurities as often as I felt confident in my intellectual abilities. Near the beginning of this dissertation, I fractured my hand, and near the end, my body ached from the hours I had accumulated sitting at the computer over the course of a year. For every claim made with confidence lay another statement in need of more research, which raised more questions, necessitating further investigation. I am not complaining. There are harder demands on life than writing a dissertation: being a construction worker, like my father; or a full-time mother / part-time secretary, like my mother; to name a few. Those and other existences carry with them little individual prestige nor recognition, let alone an acknowledgements section. How petty intellectual insecurity, typing with a fractured hand, and the demands of more research seem in comparison. And yet, writing a dissertation is still hard, and, thus, this acknowledgements section is dedicated to those who made it less hard: by providing the intellectual, emotional, and physical support I so greatly needed over the course of its writing.

I came to the University of Illinois to work with Kent Ono; and though his scholarship brought me here, it is his kindness and professional mentorship that I will remember. Kent pushed me and his other advisees to think big, embrace the discipline, but move beyond disciplinarity. His support encouraged me to work across the various departments and units at the University of Illinois, and for me and my colleagues to establish the Transnational Communications Research Focal Point Group, an interdisciplinary workshop and speaker series dedicated to placing media studies and transnational scholarship in conversation with one another. I believe I am a better scholar because of these experiences. John Nerone, likewise, not
only imbued with me an appreciation for historical research, but also had an uncanny knack for keeping me honest with his incisive criticism without crushing my soul in the process. Clifford Christian introduced me to the work of Heidegger, Ellul, and other so-called technological determinists, but most importantly served as a model of what it means to teach with unconditional love. Robert Brookey kept me honest with the game studies literature, but I will appreciate most his willingness to serve as a member of my examination and dissertation committee without hesitation, despite us never having met; and now that we do know each other, I look forward to many years of future collaboration and conversation. Reflecting upon my committee, I am reminded of the feelings I had when I first learned that Roland Barthes had died (many years ago) shortly after being hit by a laundry truck in Paris. Morbidity of this memory aside, the emotion evoked was that Roland Barthes was someone real, not just an idea—though that is all we have today. For many, so too is my committee just an idea: critical rhetorician, media historian, ethicist, and ludologist. Though there is nothing wrong with these labels, per se, and more or less accurate, I am grateful to have had the opportunity to witness something more than just the idea, and know that my committee was real.

I have been fortunate to work with an outstanding ensemble of faculty during my time at the University of Illinois. Though only four would come to graciously serve as my committee members, I have been affected by the wisdom and passion of all the faculty members I have been fortunate enough to study under and/or work alongside. Teresa Barnes, Isabel Molina, and Fiona Ngô taught me about the nuances and intersections of feminism, gender, and race studies scholarship. Peter Fritzsche, Harry Liebersohn, and David Roediger, taught me the intricacies of historiography and how to conduct sound, respectable historical research. James Hay, Bruce Rosenstock, and Robert Rushing, expanded my understanding of continental philosophers, from
Kant and Bergson to Lacan and Foucault. Cameron McCarthy served as both an instructor and mentor in teaching me the tradition of American and British cultural studies, as well as modeling this pedagogical tradition, in terms of encouraging the development of intellectual communities through collaborative book projects and journal publications. Further intellectual and emotional support was received from Anita Say Chan, CL Cole, Norman Denzin, Rayvon Fouché, Linda Herrera, Lisa Nakamura, Anke Pinkert, Sarah Projansky, Christian Sandvig, and Angharad Valdivia. To this list I should add the names of Denise Davis, Bonnie Howard, Andrea Ray, Phiavanh Sengsavanh, Bob Pollett, and Greg Zike, for behind every fantastic faculty member is often an equally fantastic, hardworking, and underappreciated staff member working diligently to make sure that everything is going smoothly. I am grateful to have worked under and alongside so many fantastic individuals, faculty and staff alike.

Many of the ideas presented in this dissertation were fleshed out during the course of the many academic conferences and intellectual conversations I was fortunate to be a part. The faculty and students associated with the annual Midwest Winter Workshop, the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, the Program in Jewish Culture & Society’s Holocaust, Genocide, and Memory Studies initiative, and the Transnational Communications Research Focal Point Group, and the various panels I presented at the National Communications Association’s annual convention were integral to my ongoing intellectual formation. Particularly, I would like to thank the following individuals: Lauren M.E. Goodlad and Michael Rothberg, for their leadership and opportunities afforded through the Unit for Criticism and HGM, respectively; Michaela Frischherz, Sara Mckinnon, Kimberly Singletary, and Robert Terrill, for the kind words and supportive feedback received on earlier drafts of this dissertation and related ideas at past MWWs; Nick Dyer-Witheford and Dal Yong Jin, for the presentations and
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I would like to give my thanks to those associated with the Education Justice Project, particularly Rebecca Ginsburg, Milton Otto, Lee Ragsdale, Rachel Rasmussen, Vanessa Rouillon, Simon Schocken, Bill Sullivan, and Martha Webber. I joined EJP with the hope of emulating my fondness for the adult education programs of early British cultural studies. It was amongst the most meaningful decisions I made during my time at the University of Illinois. Through my experience with the program, I learned much about what it means, as Stuart Hall called for, to return “the project of cultural studies from the clean air of meaning and textuality and theory to the something nasty down below.” Make no mistake, the students at the Danville Correctional Center were not theoretically or intellectually unsophisticated; but rather, the taken for granted negativity associated with such theoretical concepts as our contemporary understandings of Foucault’s notion of “discipline,” for instance, take on a different meaning when reconceived as comfort, as EJP student CG Gray argued when contrasting the differing views of incarcerated men and EJP volunteers regarding the valence associated with boxes. This is not to say one interpretation is necessarily right or wrong, for all individuals, but rather that such nuance is needed in contemporary critical theory, and I hope that this dissertation has honored the conversations had with the students and volunteers of the EJP. To those already mentioned above, I would like to thank the following students for the conversations that we had:
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Many thanks are in order as well for the many wonderful colleagues and friends I have been fortunate to meet over the course of my time at Illinois. I was fortunate to belong to a fantastic ICR cohort, in particular Sayuri Arai, Wenrui Chen, Matt Crain, Steven Doran, Talé Mitchell, and Jenny Yang. This assemblage of East Asian and North American Political Economists and cultural theorists, as well as advertising professionals, provided an intellectual environment in which we were all constantly challenged to defend our positions, in that no particular theoretical paradigm was sacred. Though tensions would arise, I am grateful that these were almost always productive and cordial, if not outright enjoyable. Beyond my cohort, I am grateful to have had the friendships and support of many other ICR alumni and current students: John Anderson, Meijiadai Bai, Martina Baldwin, Ian Davis, Richard Doherty, Vernita Fort, Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer, Dong Han, Bryce Henson, Stephen Hocker, Soyoung Ihm, Joy Jiao, Ryuta Komaki, Alicia Kozmo, Owen Kulemeka, Sangdo Oh, Carolyn Randolph, Michelle Rivera, Mel Stanfill, Darren Stevenson, Mandy Tröger, Dora Valkanova, and Jungmo Youn. Beyond the Institute of Communications Research, I have been fortunate as well to have had the additional emotional and intellectual support of Lauren Behini, Tyler Carrington, Regine Criser, Noorie Abbasi Frank, Beth Frasca, David Hanley-Tejeda, Cory Holding, Julia Johnson, Jaehoon
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Though I am grateful and appreciative of every name that appears within these acknowledgements—and apologize in advance for those that should have but do not—I want to especially thank those who went above and beyond any hope of my ever being able to adequately return the favor. Myra Washington organized writing groups that helped tremendously in keeping the dissertation on track, as well as provided a much appreciated emotional outlet through her hilarious dinner parties and other social gatherings. Peter Campbell’s breadth of knowledge and knack for puns and other sources of archaic humor were much appreciated, but it was his passion and humility that served as a constant source of inspiration. Ergin Bulut introduced me to the works of Nick Dyer-Witheford and David Harvey, and was a kindred spirit in the desire for a totalizing approach to critical game studies scholarship. Dennis Redmond shared data and ideas regarding the contemporary state of digital play, and though our dissertations differ in optimism, it seems fitting that much of our thoughts would mature over the course of us having been roommates. Aunnie Ganier read early sections of this dissertation, and her enthusiastic support provided me with the encouragement to know that what I was writing had some intellectual purchase to those outside the realm of game and media studies. Elena Esquibel provided much appreciated emotional support during my early years in Illinois, and her ongoing faith in me as a scholar has convinced me to believe in myself as well. Diana Leon, I met by happenstance, but her intellectual energy and all-around kindness have proven contagious to all who know her. Eileen Lagman served as my co-organizer for the Transnational Communications Research Focal Point Group, and her friendship and kindness were much
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It is here, then, that I wish to conclude with a special thanks to my family, to remind them, as well, that they have not been forgotten. The pursuit of my doctorate has meant missing my two sisters’ giving birth to two wonderful nephews of mine. At the time of this writing, I have met my sister Sylvia’s child, Alex, but not that of my sister Lynette. I have not always been there to see my sister Sylvia grow to become a wonderful mother—who, though she drives me crazy at times, I am proud of her commitment to her son. Likewise, I have not always been able to be there for my sister Lynette, when she was first diagnosed with cancer, and her ongoing and successful struggle to enter remission. Though I have missed much, of such great importance, they each sought to the best of their ability to attend my graduation, and one cried when realizing that it would be impossible for her to do so. I am lucky to have sisters who think so highly of me; and hope they know how equally proud I am of them. My parents as well—all of them, father, mother, step-father—have sacrificed so much to see that I succeed. My father, Gilbert Mejia Jr., believed in the American Dream so much that, like Rico’s father in Richard Sennett’s *The Corrosion of Character*, even though he had no belief in achieving the dream, he hoped so desperately that it might be within reach for me. Though I am grateful for his enthusiasm for my success, I have not forgotten the cost of this dream, and the muddling effect it has had on other definitions of success, such as those experienced by my father himself. My mother, Lisa Gonzales, sacrificed much as well. Her dreams were to be a nurse, but then she became and
embraced being a mother. Though there is nothing wrong with this transition, per se, I hope she knows how much I admire her strength in making this transition; I am 29, and I still worry about whether I am capable of caring for a child as well as my mother did when she was only 17. My stepdad, David Gonzales, has always treated me like a son, and shared in my enthusiasm for the University of Illinois—this has been much appreciated. I would like to especially thank my partner, Jennifer House, for her unwavering support of all that I did during the course of these past several years. No matter how bad my writing was, convoluted my thoughts might have been, or just plain stuck I may have felt, Jenny always believed that I had ideas worth sharing.

Though this section has perhaps been long and tiresome to some, I hope that my efforts will be understood as an attempt to recognize those who have been so essential to my intellectual and emotional development, as a scholar and a person. I hope, as well, that this acknowledgements section serves as a sign of my indebtedness to those listed—and those not listed as well—and my hope that these friendships, conversations, and memories will not end here. How fortunate I am to have come to the University of Illinois with the hope of receiving my Ph.d., and in the process having left with so much more. I am thankful for all whom I have met. I have done my best to acknowledge everyone, for how rare, sadly, these moments of public appreciation can be. My hope is that this dissertation and my academic future honors the memories we have shared and the lessons you have taught me. Thank you.
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How does one write of video games during a moment of economic turmoil, political trauma, environmental crisis, and persistent warfare? To write of video games, it would seem, would be to participate in a misguided, banal mode of cultural studies: that misidentification of the cultural artifact as itself of sociopolitical significance (Bérubé, 2009; Bodroghkozy, 2005; C. Nelson, 1991). If we conceive of video games as a thing in itself, then by all accounts this dissertation is open to criticism for perpetuating a detached, disembodied, and depoliticized form of scholarship. And yet, video games matter, especially in this moment.

Video games matter, as they have come to function as sites for thinking, or rather playing, through the problems of our contemporary moment. Many immensely popular and well-received video game franchises are busy representing our sociopolitical world through representations of some combination of our current political, economic, environmental, or military moment, for example: Call of Duty, with its re-creation of major military operations from World War II to Vietnam to hypothetical contemporary scenarios (Activision, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2008a, 2009a, 2010a, 2011b); Fallout, with its imaginings of a new social order emerging from out of a post-nuclear fallout scenario, complete with new economies, political systems, and environmental challenges (Bethesda Softworks, 2008, 2010; Interplay Entertainment, 1997, 1998); and Resident Evil, with its exploration of the political economics of biological manipulation (Capcom, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000/2001, 2002a, 2005a, 2009); et cetera.

Some may contend that the “poor” quality of the video game form when compared with more “refined” print and film media categorically preempts it from serious critical analysis. To critique a video game, transitively, is to grant it legitimacy it does not warrant (Postman, 1985/2005). The value of the video game form for critical analysis, however, comes from its
ability to serve as a provocative and productive site for thinking through the challenges of the historical moment. Indeed, many have looked to video games in order to: develop new pedagogies (Gee, 2001; S. Jones, 2006); understand how contemporary identity practices work (Boellstorff, 2008; Turkle, 1995/1997); revitalize popular culture (Bissell, 2010; Kohler, 2005) and more. Others have looked to these same games and found reasons to be concerned for video games: widespread reliance upon violence (Dietz, 1998; Scharrer, 2004), racial stereotyping (Hess, 2007; Nakamura, 2009; Shiu, 2006), and hypersexuality (Lalley, 2005; Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009), amongst other issues. The appeal and/or concern over the video game form is to be found precisely in its function as a sociopolitical lightning rod for thinking through the challenges of this historical moment (D. Williams, 2003).

It would be a mistake, however, to disentangle video games from the political, economic, and cultural forces from which they emerge. Technology and society are not separate entities, but rather mutually constituting forces (Boellstorff, 2008; R. Williams, 1974/2005), or as Paul Starr (2004) puts it, technology is “politics by other means” (p. 6). Hence, when we speak about video games, we are also talking about the sociopolitical forces articulated to the monitoring of their production and consumption, such as the military-industrial complex (Halter, 2006), patriarchy (Lalley, 2005), and other political interests.

And yet, the video game is frequently treated as a self-contained technology at the very same moment as its sociopolitical effects are said to extend beyond the technology itself. For instance, some have claimed that the status of comic book film adaptations, never known for being high culture, has been tarnished by an encroaching overemphasis on video game aesthetics (Moore, 2011; Phillips, 2011; Roeper, 2011). Academics as well, while typically more nuanced in their criticism, frequently treat video games in isolation (e.g., through exclusive reliance on
close textual readings, as opposed to historically, culturally, politically, socially situated analysis), thereby limiting what can be said about both video games and the contemporary culture. For instance, Aaron Hess (2007) writes that “since fully representing war is impossible, the limited participation of Rising Sun gamers leads to a critical blindness regarding modern warfare” (p. 352). Is this burden of full representation not an impossible task (Baudrillard, 1994b; Benjamin, 1974; Jay, 1992; White, 1990a)? And is this critique not true of all forms of contemporary remembrance? If we continue to live in an “age of amusement” (Postman, 1985/2005), it is only because there is a larger story to tell about how contemporary technology has been marshaled together toward this end and not because one technology has come to contaminate all others.

But, again, if it is true that video game technology has contaminated other media forms through its support of a depoliticized, sexist, racist, capitalist culture, why study video games? Are there not more productive sites of culture for thinking through the problems of our contemporary moment? Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God’s name is the point of studying video games? What is the point if there is no response to the question of what you say to someone who wants to know if they’ll have a job tomorrow and if it means they’ll have enough money for rent or even food to eat?ii As Stuart Hall (1992/2001) noted, “if you don’t feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook” (p. 1907). Has theory let me off the hook?

We live during a moment fraught with economic turmoil, political trauma, environmental crisis, and persistent warfare; and yet, “Where the danger is, grows / The saving power also,” as Heidegger (1954/1977a), citing Hölderlin, was apt to say (p. 27). How could we say that the questions of the present are not also questions of who gets represented and who does not?iii
Indeed, as Heidegger (1938/1977) argues, the question of the present is how the real is represented. And to the extent this is true, the question concerning technology ought to be at the fore. Hence, in order to evaluate the sociopolitical significance of the video game form, one must understand what subject positions it offers to the gamer, why it does so, and how it does so within the constraints of a given historical context. Such questioning is a necessary for opening up the impossibility of our fully confronting and coming to terms with the widespread reality of economic exploitation, political oppression, environmental destruction, and rabid militarism, and “turning” an understanding of this fact into a service of a politics for life (Heidegger, 1950/1977, 1954/1977a). In essence, I am arguing that the struggle to transform contemporary politics must be concerned with understanding (and transforming) the technologies that produce the subjectivities that sustain its very politics.iv

Indeed one assertion of this dissertation is that video games have increasingly worked to animate and then mobilize remembrances of the past, the politics of the present, and the hopes and fears for the future, so as to produce the subjectivities necessary for sustaining the politics of the present (as well as bring about those for the future). My contribution in writing this dissertation is to search for the sign of a messianic zero-hour within the video game form: that “revolutionary chance in the struggle for the suppressed past” (Benjamin, 1974, Sec. XVII). It is my belief that it is only through the telling of a historical otherwise—a form of history that speaks truth to power—that we have any hope of granting legitimacy to the subjectivities needed for a more equitable future.

To undertake this task, my theoretical approach is a blend of historiography and technology studies, as both fields have much to offer toward developing an understanding of the sociopolitical construction of the real: historiography in terms of how conceptions of the past
come to serve as (de)legitimation for the politics of the present (Langer, 1991; Lowenthal, 1998; Ono, 2009b; Weber, 1958; White, 1990b); technology studies in terms of how the production and consumption of a technological ethos works to reconfigure the real (Ellul, 1954/1964; Heidegger, 1977; Manovich, 2001; R. Williams, 1974/2005). By combining these two theoretical perspectives, I am in essence arguing that the video game form produces a particular subjectivity better suited to the sustenance (and potential subversion) of present circumstances.

To undertake this project with the care and attention it deserves, the first two chapters of the dissertation, “Games in Crisis” and “Hardcore Subjects / Hardcore Technologies” are dedicated to the two major historiographical and methodological frameworks that inform my analysis: the concept of Empire (Chapter One) and technology studies (Chapter Two). In the first chapter, I aim to situate the emergence of digital play within the history of contemporary Empire. Hence, I am indebted to Hardt and Negri (2001) and Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) for their work on the theorization of Empire. Likewise, I am equally indebted to the video game histories produced by J.C. Herz (1997), Steven Kent (2001), and David Sheff (1993/1999). In the second chapter, I aim to make a case for how the technological substructures of a given age produce the subjectivities necessary for its continued sustenance (and potential subversion). Important theorists include: [Media Studies] James Carey and Raymond Williams, for their documentation of how shifts in the means of communication have worked to reorganize society; and [Technology Studies] Jacques Ellul, Martin Heidegger, Lev Manovich, and Paul Virilio, for their work on understanding how technology, in terms of its rhetorical and material effects, works to reconstruct society alongside the logic of the machine. This chapter will serve as the theoretical foundation for the subsequent three chapters.
The following three chapters are organized around the relevant political themes engaged by the video games selected for analysis: Chapter Three, “The Economics of Play”; Chapter Four, “The Logistics of Play”; Chapter Five, “The Ecologies of Play.” For each chapter, I will attempt to link the development of each video game franchise with the corresponding political economic and sociocultural events of the moment. For instance, Lisa Keränen (2011) argues that the anthrax mailings following the events of 9/11 worked to amplify U.S. cultural anxiety in clandestine biological warfare. During this very same period, the Resident Evil franchise began to shift from a narrative of corporate abuse at the hands of the Umbrella Corporation (a ruthless pharmaceutical company) toward that of catching indigenous terrorists seeking to spread a homegrown disease. Since it is widely acknowledged that 9/11 resulted in a shift in global politics (Agamben, 2004/2008; MacCabe, 2008; Ono, 2009c), it is not surprising that the transformation would affect the production and consumption of video games. The question then, however, is how do these various video games take up the challenge of this historical moment and what stance do they offer to the player in terms of understanding the cause of the event and the appropriate response to it? Answering this question requires a methodology built from historiography, the philosophy of technology, the political economy of communication, and rhetorical criticism.

The games selected for this study have been chosen due to the iconic status they hold within the video game industry, amongst both developers and players alike. They are: Chapter Three, the Civilization franchise; Chapter Four, the Call of Duty franchise; and Chapter Five, the Resident Evil franchise. While other games could have been selected, I believe the reverence and influential status of those chosen are enough to encapsulate the rough contours of the subjectivities offered by the video game form. Should this project succeed, the work for future
scholars will be toward that of sharpening the critical edge of this rough approximation; likewise, my hope is that recommendations for future design decisions will emerge so that future developers can work toward putting these frameworks to the test.

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Notes:

i It is perhaps ironic that this mode of cultural criticism is exactly what the early founders of British Cultural Studies, in particular, sought to guard against:

‘Mass communication’ [is used] by almost all its agents and advisers as well, curiously, as by most of its radical critics. […] But then this new form of social communication – broadcasting – was obscured by its definition as ‘mass communication’; an abstraction to its most general characteristic, that it went to many people, ‘the masses’, which obscured the fact that the means chosen was the offer of individual sets, a method much better described as ‘broadcasting.’ (R. Williams, 1974/2005, pp. 16-17)

Or as E.P. Thompson (1966) wrote:

By class I understand an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness. I emphasis that it is an historical phenomenon. I do not see class as a “structure”, nor even as a “category”, but as something which in fact happens […] in human relationships. (p. 9)

What scholars operating under the rubric of cultural studies do, when they ignore these earlier warnings, is to confuse a product produced for popular consumption as constituting the popular audience itself. The goal, hence, is not to understand the internal workings of a cultural artifact in itself, but to understand how that selfsame artifact emerges from a historical process and carries with it cultural effects (C. Nelson, 1991).

ii These sentences are clearly taken from Stuart Hall’s (1992/2001) revered article, “Cultural Studies and It’s Theoretical Legacies.” I left the sentences unmarked in the text for the sake of emphasizing the tension experienced in the doing of this work, a tension that perhaps would have been undermined by the marking of the citation itself. For the sake of ethical scholarship, however, the citation is included in its totality here:

AIDS is one of the questions which urgently brings before us our marginality as critical intellectuals in making real effects in the world. And yet it has often been represented for us in contradictory ways. Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies? What is the point of the study of representations, if there is no response to the question of what you say to someone who wants to know if they should take a drug and if that means they'll die two days later or a few months earlier? At that point, I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we've been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything. If you don't feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook. On the other hand, in the end, I don't agree with the way in which this dilemma is often posed for us, for it is indeed a more complex and displaced question than just people dying out there. The question of AIDS is an extremely important terrain of struggle and contestation. In addition to the people we know who are dying, or have died, or will, there are the many people dying who are never spoken of. How could we say that the question of AIDS is not also a question of who gets represented and who does not? AIDS is the site at which the advance of sexual politics is being rolled back. It's a site at which not only people will die, but desire and pleasure will also die if certain metaphors do not survive, or survive in the wrong way. […] It [cultural studies] has to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of
representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death. Those are the things cultural studies can address. (p. 1907-1908)

iii See comment regarding Stuart Hall above.
iv This need not be the explicit project of all concerned with combating oppression, as there is much work to be done, but it is an important element nevertheless, and hence my proposed contribution.
v The list of industry awards received, sale records set, and fan praise received by the games selected for analysis are too numerous to list in detail here. That said, all the games under analysis have received Game of the Year awards from respected video game magazines/websites and/or professional organizations: Civilization IV (2K Games, 2005a); Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences, 2008); and, Resident Evil 4 (GameSpot, 2005).
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION: GAMES IN CRISIS

March 11, 2011, visitors of the Australian YouTube were greeted with the breaking news that North Korea had attacked the United States’ mainland. Embedded within the news report was an image of an intercontinental ballistic missile and a news crawler stating “World Leaders in Shock… UN in Crisis Meetings over Korean Attacks… ‘Act of Unjustified Aggression’” (Luke, 2011). Scrolling over the “News Today” banner expanded the report to initiate a sequence of footage announcing that Kim Jong-il had passed away, and that his son, Kim Jung-un, had taken over leadership, and that the Korean Peninsula had subsequently voted for reunification (Bradford, 2011). Throughout the footage, images of civil unrest and evidence of an emerging police state were shown as a reporter commented that “across the nation, civil unrest has intensified with the demise of the U.S. dollar” (THQ, 2010).

By this point, if not earlier, attentive viewers would have noticed the “Close Ad” command in the top-right corner of the “News Today” banner and realized that the so-called report was actually part of a massive marketing campaign by THQ for its upcoming video game, Homefront (THQ, 2011b). The realization, however, did not remedy the visceral reaction many viewers had towards the fictional report: “HOLY SHIT I thought North Korea ACTUALLY Launched a nuclear ATTACK! FUCK YOU YOUTUBE AND YOUR SHITTING GAMING ADVERTISING” (Luke, 2011). Described as “tasteless,” “offensive,” and “misleading,” THQ itself was critiqued for “producing an inflammatory game based upon a current political problem that could result in the deaths of many South and North Koreans” (Bradford, 2011). The reference being made here is to the heightened political tension on the Korean Peninsula, following North Korea’s sinking of the ROKS Cheonan (March 2010) and bombardment of
Yeonpyeong Island (November 2010), of which the former was referenced prominently within THQ’s (2010) advertisement. Despite being a fictional scenario, one designed as a vehicle for selling a videogame, the reference to real-world national tensions, which called upon fears some might have genuinely felt about U.S./North Korea tensions in 2011, promotes a discourse that does more than simply sell a product.

Though gamers came to the defense of THQ, commenting that “It isn’t supposed to be a serious scenario; it is a plot for a video game. Get a life” (Bradford, 2011), those familiar with the work of John Milius, Homefront’s writer, would have found reason to think otherwise. Perhaps most known for his having co-written the script for Apocalypse Now (Coppola, 1979), it is Milius’s work on the film Red Dawn (1984) that is of most interest here. Released in 1984, the film depicts a near-future scenario in which the United States is invaded by the Soviet Union and its Cuban and Nicaraguan allies. The sudden invasion has left the United States government and military in disarray, thus forcing the citizenry to fend for themselves. Though the plausibility of the narrative remains questionable—in that a handful of high school students successfully repel a capable military force—the scenario itself tapped into the fears and desires of the cultural milieu known as the Cold War. For those involved in the development of Homefront, the plausibility of John Milius’ speculative fiction, as captured in Red Dawn, served as a source of inspiration (THQ, 2011c); Milius’s subsequent service as the game’s writer only served to concretize the already profound influence he had on the cultural formation of those involved in the production of the game.

Homefront may serve as a more explicit example of the ability for video games to capture and speak to the fears and desires of a cultural moment, but one need not stretch the imagination to compile a formidable list of other digital games dealing with historical and/or politically
salient subject matter; the following sample is illustrative: *1942* (Capcom, 1984), *Rush’n Attack* (Konami, 1985), *Desert Strike: Return to the Gulf* (Electronic Arts, 1992), *Medal of Honor* (Electronic Arts, 1999b), *Command & Conquer: Generals* (Electronic Arts, 2003a), *Battlefield Vietnam* (Electronic Arts, 2004a), to name a few. That this list is dominated by military-based game content is not surprising considering the close proximity of the video game industry to the military-industrial complex, in terms of its origins and ongoing working relationship (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Halter, 2006).

Perhaps prophetically, the first video game, *Tennis for Two* (Higinbotham, 1958), was developed by William A. Higinbotham, a member of the original Manhattan Project, as an exhibit for the U.S. Department of Nuclear Energy’s Brookhaven National Laboratory’s Open House day (Halter, 2006; Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & de Peuter, 2003; Lalley, 2005). These public events were designed to lessen the apprehension the average American held toward nuclear energy and research (Halter, 2006). Higinbotham had hoped his invention would prove more inviting to the public than the typical Open House fare of “cold, imposing banks of ineffably blinking lights” (Halter, 2006, p. 78). Though we can only imagine as to how the public of 1958 received the invitation that was *Tennis for Two*, evidence exists regarding how these electronic invitations have been received by contemporary audiences: in 2005, forty percent of new U.S. military recruits reported playing the pentagon-funded *America’s Army* prior to enlisting (Barnes, 2005). Though this game functions as part of the U.S. military’s larger shift from print and TV advertisements to more cost-effective recruitment methods, such as event co-sponsorships (J. Edwards, 2004), the use of digital media, particularly digital play, worked to reconfigure warfare as a “real-time” site of play, for soldiers and citizens alike; creating what Roger Stahl (2006) calls, “the virtual citizen-soldier.” That is, a subject who’s “integration into a
sanitized fantasy of war is a seduction whose pleasures are felt at the expense of the capacity for critical engagement in matters of military might” (R. Stahl, 2006, p. 126).

It is ironic that decades after it was dismantled and its parts recycled for other projects (Halter, 2006), and after Higinbotham had long served as a prominent member of the Science for Peace movement (Chaplin & Ruby, 2005; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), that the legacy of *Tennis for Two* is that the video game would continue to serve as perhaps the most successful ambassador of the military-industrial complex—and by extension, Empire. The story of how this came to be, that is, how video games were able to move beyond the military-industrial complex, but not the reaches of Empire, is one worth knowing if we are to critically intervene upon the site of power we call gaming.

**An Apparatus of Empire**

The video game is more than a mere apparatus of the military-industrial complex. It is one of Empire (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Empire, according to Hardt and Negri (2001) refers to that vast political economic regime that operates through a mixed-constitution of entities (e.g., nation-states, city-states, non-governmental organizations), interests (e.g., economic, political, cultural), and processes (e.g., reinforcement, resistance, resignation). Though Empire is governed by the political economic interests of powerful nation-states and non-governmental organizations, these selfsame entities are made-up of a vast multitude of peoples. This assemblage of bodies, which at once enable the system to function, holds out the possibility for its disaggregation—and is hence the essence of the mixed-constitution of the global apparatus that is Empire. Operating as a global apparatus whose functioning cuts across an array of interests and practices, Empire is therefore vulnerable to subversion at each point in its application, and therefore must constantly remake itself; and in this remaking of itself, the
possibility exists that a conscious, ethical intervention at various points in the system could transform the subsequent functioning or overcoming of Empire (Hardt & Negri, 2001). Operating at the level of Empire, then, means that the video game both extends and exceeds the reach of military interests (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

In contrast to the political power of transnational financial capital and the military might of a global policing power, the conception of an entertainment technology, the video game, as an apparatus of Empire may appear to be a bit much—let alone as a viable site for transforming its functioning. And yet, Hardt and Negri (2001) saw all new communication technologies, from the computer and the internet to the satellite and cellular telephone, as technologies “embedded within and completely immanent to the” practices of Empire (p. 298). These new communication technologies extend the penetration and reach of Empire, transform the means of production and consumption, as well as produce the subjectivities necessary for these new political economic practices (Hardt & Negri, 2001, 2004). Considering the vastness of the internet, the processing power of the personal, commercial, and military computer, the ubiquity of cellular telephony, and the global surveillance system of the satellite, the fun factory that is the video game industry would seem to be a relatively innocuous site of imperial practices. And yet, the video game industry does indeed traverses the body of Empire in that digital gaming constitute a multinational industry controlled by various corporations working together to establish and maintain markets. These transnational corporations, such as Nintendo and Sony, have established a vast political economic network of console assembling sweatshops, air-conditioned programming facilities, and complex advertising processes, so as to extend the reach of what constitutes an electronic gaming audience. Moreover, as explicit sites for playing through one’s fears and desires, the video game offer a provocative site for thinking through the biopolitics of Empire.
The conception of digital play as an important apparatus of Empire, however, is stymied by the veil of interactivity that shrouds the video game. It would seem that perhaps more so than older forms of media, books, radio, film, or television, the video game controller offers a mechanism by which the user can affect the content of the narrative. We must remember, however, that there is a difference between “playing a creative role within an authored environment and having authorship of the environment itself” (Murray, 1997, p. 152). Failure to acknowledge this distinction—a failure that is actively encouraged through the vast apparatus of video game advertising—means that we have mistaken the anxieties and desires of “somebody’s else mind for our own” (Manovich, 2001, p. 74). This is not to say that psychological correspondence cannot exist between the gamer and game developer, but rather that mistaking one’s self to be the author of one’s digital environment is to extend modern conceptions of identity, which are already tenuous (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1975/1995, 1976/1990), into an environment that is explicitly postmodern by design; if we cannot claim to have created our physical and psychological selves, then we definitely cannot claim to have authored our digital manifestations. That said, to say that consoles promote misrecognition “is not to deny that they are pleasurable; it is to say that pleasure itself channels power” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 92). But, the affects of video game playing do not stop there. Pleasure is not the only emotion invested into the act of play; in operation are other emotions as well, such as fear and frustration, and perhaps earlier work on popular culture emphasized “pleasure” at the expense of these other affects. Thus, as the example with *Homefront* illustrates, the experience of fear is also undoubtedly met not necessarily with pleasure alone (though it may indeed be in operation), but also with the production and circulation of fear as well—in that North Korea is received as a plausible and legitimate threat.
The spectacle of the annual Entertainment Electronics Expo (E3) in downtown Los Angeles serves as an excellent example of the functioning of the video game industry as an apparatus of Empire, and thus an ideal vantage point from which to view the strands of affects ranging from pleasure to fear operating within digital play. Housed within the 720,000 square feet Los Angeles Convention Center, the Expo attracted over 200 exhibitors and 46,800 attendees from over 100 countries for the 2011 convention (Entertainment Software Association, 2011b). With participants ranging from console makers, such as Nintendo, whose promotional workers wore the company’s new Wii U controller tethered around their waist (Figure 1.1), to GameChurch.com, whose book, Jesus, For the Win (2010), features a game-playing Jesus on the cover (Figure 1.2), the event certainly sought to live up to its theme of “Exceeding Imagination.”
The excess of the spectacle does not mark the convention in contestation with the imaginings of Empire, however; rather, the excess is one of the extension and ever deepening penetration of the imperial imagination: business development directors from Creata (the promotions company behind McDonald’s, Kellogg’s, Coca Cola and others) looking for new merchandising opportunities; military personnel promoting the booth for Pro vs. GI Joe, a nonprofit organization, whose mission is to boost troop morale and raise public support for the military (Pro vs. GI Joe, 2011); massive banners for the game, Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine (THQ, 2011d), with testimonials such as “when you absolutely, positively got to kill every Ork in the room—accept no substitutes” (Figure 1.3), which reads like an endorsement for anti-bacterial soap. The pageantry of financial speculation, the seamless presence of military force, and the fantasy of overcoming sanitary anxiety; three pillars of contemporary Empire (Hardt & Negri, 2001; Virilio, 2004/2005) made manifest, even pleasurable, through the fun factory that is the video game. When financial security is itself a site of constant insecurity (Harvey, 2007; Palm Beach Post, 2002), when states of exception are no longer exceptional
(Agamben, 2004/2008; CNN, 2010), when the means for overcoming sanitary anxiety produce new sanitary anxieties (Keränen, 2011; Rather, 2011), the video game industry offers the promise of relief.

The Precarious World of Imperial Play

That video games are recession proof has been said so often that one cannot help but be skeptical, and even believe otherwise. Sales of video game software in terms of both monetary value and units sold has actually declined in the United States since peaking in 2008 (Entertainment Software Association, 2011a). Complicating matters is the increasing cost of producing video game content due to the development of ever more complex consoles, which subsequently produce expectations of highly-detailed gameplay environments, fully orchestrated soundtracks, talented voice acting, and other associated modern expectations. These expectations have made the cost of developing competitive game content for the contemporary generation of home consoles skyrocket, so much so that production costs now commonly fall in the range of $10-40 million (Take-Two Interactive, 2009). Combined with development cycles that generally last 1-3 years, the industry has become increasingly "hit" driven—a source of anxiety for many of the mid-sized to smaller publishers within the industry (Take-Two Interactive, 2009; THQ, 2011a). Game companies hope for that one big hit around which all of their other games can be tethered, a major game that stabilizes the corporation's profits. Though the precarious economic environment has not seemed to concern some of the larger publishers (See Activision-Blizzard, 2010), even industry giants are not immune to the effects of fiscal anxiety: Electronic Arts, amongst the largest game publishers in the world, has generated a net loss of $454m (2008), $1,088m (2009), and $677m (2010), for the last three years respectively (Electronic Arts, 2010a); in the case of Nintendo, merely confirming the development of an unconventional new
console—an announcement that had been in anticipation for two months prior (Reilly, 2011a)—resulted in a 4.6% stock decline, despite relatively optimistic consumer and developer support for the system (Thorsen, 2011). Welcome to the precarious world of play.

The world of play, however, has long been tenuous. Extending back further than the current period of fiscal uncertainty that has shaken the industry as of late, a high degree of economic anxiety has saturated digital play from the beginnings of the industry (Kent, 2001; Stone, 1995/1998). For an industry established with the myth of a laissez-faire, anti-corporate, working atmosphere, aspects of exploitation, if not outright exploitation, in terms of euphemisms such as “crunch” (unpaid and/or mandatory overtime), has come to be a common feature of the workplace (Bonds, et al., 2004; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; EA Spouse, 2004; Stross, 2004). As the authors for the International Game Developers Association’s (IGDA) white paper, *Quality of Life in the Game Industry*, wrote:

The workplace is a stressful one everywhere, more so in the game industry than in most others. Long hours are endemic. Most projects fail in the market place. High-profile studio closures are announced every month. And while the work we do is stimulating and rewarding in its own right, there is no reason not to make our working conditions a lot better than they are today.

For young career-oriented people fresh out of school, our industry’s shortcomings, with its endemic long hours and 95% marketplace failure rate, may not always seem obvious or crippling. But after a few years, all-nighters fuelled by coffee and pizza lose much of their appeal. Most come to want significant relationships, a more balanced life, and sometimes, children as well. None of this is easy to achieve in the typical game company. (Bonds, et al., 2004, p. 5)

In the seven-years since the white paper was written, reports continue to suggest that the quality of life for those laboring in the workshops of the video game industry continues to be precarious: in 2008, Electronic Arts began to increase the size of its workforce in countries with lax labor laws as it simultaneously eliminated jobs in countries with greater workplace protections (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009); in 2011, controversy stemming from the omission of over 100 employees from the official credits of *L.A. Noire* (Rockstar Games, 2011) led to an exposé on the exploitive working conditions at the game’s developer, Team Bondi (FullAhead & Pollock,
and recently, Kaos Studies, the developer responsible for *Homefront*, was closed by its parent company, THQ, as part of a “strategic realignment” (Reilly, 2011b)—even as THQ proudly reported that strong sales of the game contributed to company net sales of $802.3 million, and now has plans to turn it into a franchise (THQ, 2011a). It would seem that though work within the video game industry may be “stimulating and rewarding in its own right,” the forces of global capital are quickly evacuating any semblance of fun from actually working within it. As one gamer, bigdaddy7378, however, commented regarding the working conditions at Team Bondi, “good thing it [*L.A. Noire*] didn’t suck” (comment in McMillen, 2011). Insensitive as the comment may be, perhaps within the precarious economies of play, all one can hope is that Empire at least continues to grant us the dignity that, if nothing else, at least the products we purchase will continue to remain pleasurable.

Though the development of enjoyable gaming experiences continue to be had, unfortunately, the pressures and interests of global capital have made it so that often players are increasingly paying more for less pleasurable content. This is not to say that the games of today are less fun than the games of yesterday, as that is a complicated debate beyond the scope of this dissertation, but rather that the risk management of global capital has dictated that it is more profitable to extend already existent intellectual properties, in terms of sequels, ports, and add-on content, than it is to develop original, experimental content (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Snider, 2011). Like other industries (e.g., film), the production of sequels for a popular franchise is a given; however, other than the comic book industry, it is arguable that the video game industry relies on sequels much more so than perhaps any other major entertainment industry. Commenting on this widespread practice of regular sequel production, EA Spouse (2004), the individual who initiated the 2004 exposé on exploitation in the industry, wrote:
EA’s bright and shiny new corporate trademark is ‘Challenge Everything’ [since retired]. Where this applies is not exactly clear. Churning out one licensed football game after another doesn’t sound like challenging much of anything to me; it sounds like a money farm.

If, however, franchises are the money farms of video games, then the products known as add-on content are the hotdogs of the video game industry: everyone knows the content is excess material leftover from creating the original product, but still we consume it. The practice of add-on content, like hotdogs, extends the life of the previous product, as well as minimizes the cost of production as existing character models, music, and other gameplay elements can be reused. This gap between the exchange-value and use-value of the add-on content is frequently much greater than that which exists in the original content. For example, the standalone game of *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* (Konami, 2010) cost $60 and contains about 15-20 hours of gameplay related content (Hatfield, 2010); it’s add-on content *Reverie* (Konami, 2011b) and *Resurrection* (Konami, 2011a) cost $10 each and contains about 2-hours of additional content combined (Bocanegra, 2011a, 2011b). Pleasure costs more and is exhausted more quickly as a result.

Though the demise of the blatant serial offender, the *Guitar Hero* franchise, which produced a series of 10 sequels for the franchise from 2006 to 2010 (Activision, 2007b, 2008c, 2008b, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d, 2010b, 2010c; RedOctane & Activision, 2006, 2007), would seem to serve as a warning of the exhaustion of pleasure brought about at the hands of global capital, the move toward add-on and supplemental content suggests gaming is no longer about pleasure but a whole way of life.

**Toward a Whole Way of Life**

In the no longer brief history of the video game, historians of the medium have highlighted several periods as significant: the creation of *Spacewar!* (S. Russell, 1962), which activated the hacker foundation of the industry, and thus has subsequently come to be deemed the first video
game in spite of Higinbotham’s *Tennis for Two* (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Herz, 1997; Kent, 2001)⁹; the founding of Atari and mass success of *Pong* (Atari, 1972) in 1972, marking the video game industry as a site of legitimate economic activity (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kent, 2001; Kline, et al., 2003); and, the industry crash of 1983, which allowed for the subsequent reconfiguration of the video game industry as a platform driven, techno-monopoly in 1986 (Herz, 1997; Kent, 2001; Kinder, 1991/1993; Kline, et al., 2003). Important as these dates, and others, surely are to the current course of the industry, it is the year 1989 that deserves our attention. Not only did this date mark when the industry shifted from a Nintendo led monopoly, toward one anchored by a Nintendo-Sega led oligopoly, the year marks the moment when video games transitioned from that of a place-based entertainment system (i.e., the arcade or home) toward that of a global entertainment supersystem—and thus, the industry took its first baby steps towards becoming a whole way of life.⁹

From the release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in 1986 up to the Christmas of 1989, Nintendo had little reason to worry about its status as the most coveted toy maker within the United States. The NES had been amongst the most desired, if not most desired, toy for the past three holiday seasons (Feuer, 1988; Karp, 1989; Reuters, 1989; Rosenberg, 1987; Tibbits, 1989). New media technologies have often resonated as a source of cultural anxiety, especially when placed in relation to children; it is no surprise, then, that the widespread popularity of the NES would quickly become a lightning rod for social criticism (Adler, Rogers, Brailsford, Gordon, & Quade, 1989; D. Williams, 2003). Concern about the moral and physical effects of video game play meant that, in 1989, Nintendo was in a precarious situation, as concerned parents were believed to be looking for alternative forms of children’s entertainment (Reuters, 1989)—and that Nintendo was a Japanese company, at a time of
heightened anti-Japanese sentiment, only added to this cultural, political, and economic anxiety (Ono, 2009a; Sheff, 1993/1999). As such, the immense popularity with children of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (TMNT) franchise, with its Playmate Toys’ produced action figures, meant that for the first time, Nintendo faced a serious challenge in its ability to capture the support of not only parents and politicians, but the imaginations of children (Kinder, 1991/1993).xi

The challenge was one of a home entertainment system (the NES) confronting the cultural might of this diffuse entertainment supersystem (the TNMT). The difference between an entertainment system and an entertainment supersystem has more to do with the ability for a political economic network to transcend its existent cultural space than it necessarily does with its political economic size—though the two are related (Kinder, 1991/1993). Marsha Kinder (1991/1993) defines a supersystem as “a network of intertextuality constructed around a figure or group of figures from pop culture who are either fictional […] or ‘real’” (p. 122). Prior to 1989, Nintendo, and video games more generally, lacked this intertextual transcendence and remained confined to their sites of consumption, arcades and living rooms. This is not to suggest that earlier attempts to delink video game culture from video game technology had not been undertaken but rather that earlier attempts had been undercut by the industry crash of 1983. Moreover, these earlier attempts merely sought to share in the profits of, and not necessarily the form or content of, video game consumption. In other words, Tron (Lisberger, 1982) and Chuck E. Cheese’s (established by Atari founder, Nolan Bushnell) have as much to do with video game practices as William Gibson’s Neuromancer (1984) does with the internet; sure, Tron, Chuck E. Cheese’s, and Neuromancer, have each captured the imagination of both consumers, producers, and cultural critics alike, for their respective mediums; however, none constitute a whole way of
life, but rather offer commentary upon it. For the video game, in 1989, this absence existed no more.

The foundations for a coming video game cultural revolution were established with the delinking of video game culture from video game technology with the establishment of Nintendo’s entertainment supersystem in 1989 (Kinder, 1991/1993). Crystalizing a process that had begun in 1988, with the establishment of the magazine Nintendo Power and the licensing of Nintendo characters for products such as lunch boxes (Sheff, 1993/1999), 1989 saw the development of the television shows The Super Mario Bros. Super Show! (Riba, 1989), Captain N: The Game Master (Maliani, 1989-1991), and Todd Holland’s film, The Wizard (1989). Though the quality of these programs were lacking and often amateurish in design, and poorly received by critics and general audiences alike, the productions were never meant to be anything more than glorified commercials for Nintendo products (Kinder, 1991/1993; Sheff, 1993/1999). Advertising for The Wizard, for instance, featured a huge number of Nintendo product placements, most notably the first video images of the heavily anticipated game, Super Mario Bros. 3. (Kinder, 1991/1993; Sheff, 1993/1999) (See Figure 1.4); as David Sheff (1993/1999) noted, “The Wizard was less a piece of art than a one-hundred-minute advertisement for Nintendo that millions of families paid to see (it grossed $14 million)” (p. 4). More than mere commercials, however, this multimedia supersystem, spread across licensed toys, magazines, television, film, and, yes, video games, extended the world of video game play beyond the confines of the video game system. Hence, in 1989, we first witnessed the production of a subject known as a “Nintendo Kid” (Adler, et al., 1989).

The construction of the subject known as the “Nintendo Kid” in 1989 meant that the video game form had become an anchor for the desires and anxieties of a whole generation of
On December 14, Universal City Studios will premiere “The Wizard,” a movie that is sure to be a blockbuster hit for video game fans. The film stars Fred Savage (The Wonder Years) and Beau Bridges in a story where being a Power Player is more a matter of survival than fun. Corey’s family is torn apart by a tragic accident that causes 9-year-old Jimmy (Luke Edwards) to shut out the world around him to the point that he is committed to a psychiatric hospital. Corey (Fred Savage) decides to rescue Jimmy from the hospital, and they set off on an adventure. Jimmy communicates to his big brother, Corey, that he wants to go to California. With only $27.30 between them, Corey needs to be pretty resourceful if they are going to reach California. The two brothers find help along the way from quite a few unusual sources, including a street wise girl named Haley. Together they discover that Jimmy has an unusual talent that becomes their sole source of making money—playing video games. Jimmy and Corey hustle their way across the USA by making bets in video arcades. Since they aren’t old enough to drive, they find some pretty strange modes of transportation, like stowing away in the back of a cattle car, or in a truck filled with Hostess Twinkies. As if all this doesn’t make the journey entertaining enough, their parents have decided to come after them, and wind up in their own competition of sorts. Both their father, and a private detective hired by their stepfather, are in hot pursuit. And, both are determined to find the boys first. By spending more time worrying about each other than they do about the boys, they end up in some pretty hilarious predicaments.

Along their route, the guys hear about a national video game championship called “Video Armageddon” in Los Angeles, and make it their ultimate goal. To qualify, they have to face some pretty stiff competition and must be confident of their expertise on 96 different NES games. The semi-finals are played out on Ninja Gaiden, and the big event pits the finalists against each other on Super Mario Bros. 3.

To find out who wins up taking the honors as video game champ, you’ll have to go see “The Wizard.” It will give you a great chance to get a preview of Super Mario Bros. 3, plus, the first people to see the film will receive a copy of “Pocket Power”—a mini edition of Nintendo Power with more great tips and game news.
game playing participants, mostly children. At the height of Nintendo’s monopoly on the video game market, it was estimated that one out of every four to five homes in the United States had an NES (Karp, 1989; Kinder, 1991/1993; Tibbits, 1989). Over the course of the next two decades, though the dominance of Nintendo would falter due to competitors entering the videogame marketplace, the video game industry would grow in size from an estimated $3.4b in 1989 (Tibbits, 1989) to $25.1b in 2010, with video games played by 72% of U.S. households (Entertainment Software Association, 2011a). The breadth and depth of the video game, however, cannot be understood solely in political economic terms, as the cultural formation has long since come to extend beyond the technology itself. With the “Nintendo Kid” having long since become an adult, the children of the Nintendo generation are now in their mid-twenties to thirties, with the average age of the present-day game player being thirty-seven years old (Entertainment Software Association, 2011a). This maturation of the industry and its consumer, mostly in terms of economics and age, respectively, if not always ethically, has had an effect on an array of various cultural forms: from the design and content of various films, such the critically acclaimed Avatar (Cameron, 2009) and the equally panned Sucker Punch (Snyder, 2011); to the increasingly popular field of video game music and musicians, such as the indie rock sound of The Megas (See Get Equipped, 2008) and the classical sound of Video Games Live (See Newman, Tallarico, & Wall, 2010); to the conceptualization of new pedagogies (Gee, 2001; S. Jones, 2006; Stuart, 2010); and more. With this maturation, however, has also come an erasure of whatever innocence may have surrounded the original subject known as the “Nintendo Kid.” Beyond the economic gravity of an entertainment supersystem (e.g., Nintendo Kid or Sega Fanboy), the subsumption of gaming culture as an apparatus of Empire, as brought about by the political economic involvement of major transnational entities, such as Microsoft, Sony, and the
United States military, has made it so that while we may not all be “hardcore” gamers, we do all
live in an increasingly “hardcore” world. This is the political economic face of cultural
convergence; beyond the pleasures of a converging cultural text (Jenkins, 2006), one must
account for the legitimate anxieties and desires that are being created—that is, converging—
through the material and ideological reconfigurations of an increasingly imperial world.

Subjects of Empire
The events detailed in the prior section, were important, and continue to be important insofar as
the production of the “Nintendo Kid” made it possible for the video game to become an ordinary
aspect of one’s life. From then on, for other video game companies to successfully compete, so
too would the content they offered have to hold out the promise of constituting a whole way of
life—that is, the promise of a life worth living. This is why, even after Nintendo had to forgo its
monopoly privileges and relax its licensing agreements due to a series of antitrust investigations
in 1990 (Kent, 2001), a video game oligopoly did not truly emerge until 1991, when Sega made a
breakthrough with the development of Sonic the Hedgehog (1991b) (Kline, et al., 2003). Though
the creation of the blue hedgehog with attitude had surprising brand appeal with adolescent
males, and helped to solidify its marketing campaign of “Genesis Does What Nintendon’t,”
Sega’s political economic strategy remained markedly similar to Nintendo’s insofar as the desire
was to construct an entertainment supersystem capable of capturing a larger share of the $3b
video game industry (Cray, 1990). In essence, Sega sought to produce the “Fanboys” necessary
to function as a viable challenger to Nintendo’s industry dominance. Powerful as both companies
may have been, however, neither had the political economic means necessary to create the
“hardcore” subject necessary for contemporary global capital. As entertainment supersystems,
Nintendo and Sega could only activate their respective audiences to consume a narrow
commodity across a broad spectrum of entertainment media and commodities—e.g., *Mario* games, *Mario* cartoons, *Mario* lunch boxes, et cetera—but could not activate that selfsame subject to reshape the world according to the logic of the video game. In other words, as entertainment supersystems, Nintendo and Sega could create worlds for gamers (but not non-gamers) to live within. Sega’s frantic campaign to set itself apart from Nintendo—producing thirty-five commercials over a period of four months (Kline, et al., 2003)—did, however, accelerate a process of imperial subsumption that had been with gaming from its beginnings as a military-funded—if not necessarily endorsed—technology. And if Sega and Nintendo could not create the hardcore subjects necessary for contemporary Empire, other powerful interests could and would.

Indeed, the construction of a “hardcore” world, here defined as apprehending and reconstructing the world according to the logic of digital play, and “hardcore” subject, here defined as that subject capable of desiring and bringing about this hardcore world, emerged nearly simultaneously with the development of the video game. Unlike Higinbotham’s *Tennis for Two* (1958), which was accepted due to its being part of an open house installation, and Steve Russell’s *Spacewar!* (1962), which was encouraged as part of a non-military computing subculture, Ralph Baer, inventor of the first home video game console during the late-1960s, had to explicitly justify his device according to the framework of military interests (Halter, 2006). Though he would later state that these justifications were mere window dressing meant to allow for him to continue working on “TV Games,” the military took notice, and in the late 1970s, Baer would begin to develop video game weapon-training systems for the military (Halter, 2006, p. 85). Moreover, as Allucquère Rosanne Stone (1995/1998) observes, the military-industrial complex has always taken notice: the earliest research in the field of virtual technologies were
undertaken for explicitly military purposes. For example, the Rand Corporation, a non-
governmental military think tank, has long been using “poli
tico-military games […] as an 
educational tool for understanding possible outcomes in various global situations,” and then 
promoting these simulated outcomes as objective possibilities of future political developments 
(Halter, 2006, p. 92). Though the military took interest in the establishment of a hardcore world, 
through the deployment of digital play as a warfare simulation technology, however, the active 
construction of a hardcore subject, one who found living in a hardcore world pleasurable, would 
be undertaken primarily via another branch of Empire, global capital.

Sony’s inadvertent entry into the video game industry in 1995 (Kent, 2001), initiated the 
beginnings of a massive political economic convergence of various media technologies (Dyer-
Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). The surprising success of Sony’s PlayStation (PS), emboldened 
the company to reconfigure the gaming machine as a multimedia platform; the PlayStation 2 
(PS2) was marketed and enthusiastically received as a home entertainment system capable of 
playing both video games and movies (DVDs), thereby functioning as a gateway entertainment 
technology for many households (DVD Report, 2000; Guy, 2000; Hancock, 2000; Inside 
Multimedia, 1999). Indeed, consumer demand for the PS2 was believed to be so great that trade 
magazines anticipated that the U.S. DVD-player install base would grow significantly (DVD 
Report, 2000; Inside Multimedia, 1999). This meant that whether playing a video game or 
watching a DVD, the comfortable PS2 startup screen—of blue and white cubes floating in space, 
accompanied by a soft, synthesized futuristic sound and an image of “Sony Computer 
Entertainment”—would become a familiar sight to millions of households. Realizing that Sony’s 
game console could function as not just a powerful branding device, but also a mechanism by 
which to influence the production and consumption of other commodities and technologies,
Microsoft entered the industry shortly thereafter, in Fall 2001 (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). The entrance of these two transnational giants moved video gaming beyond that of the entertainment supersystems of Nintendo and Sega toward that of an imperial apparatus; the objective of which was to create the hardcore subjectivities necessary to bring about the realities of a hardcore world.

**Living in a Hardcore World**

The transformation of the video game industry as an apparatus of Empire is markedly different from its days as an entertainment supersystem. The video game has come a long way from the days of speculating whether it would be the most popular Christmas toy. Today, the question is how will Sony’s decision to remove Linux support from the PlayStation 3 (PS3) impact the United States’ military—in 2009, the U.S. Air Force began purchasing and transforming PS3s into powerful, cost-effective super computers (Betts, 2009; Federal News Service, 2010; McElroy, 2010). Digital play is no longer about digital play; rather, the video game has come to be a powerful model upon which to apprehend and reconfigure reality. The massive political economic mobilization of gamers now drives the adoption and development of technological standards, from Blu-ray and high-definition television to broadband internet and the development of ever more advanced microprocessors. The demand for these electronic devices, especially video games, has activated a vast global political economic network: linking together the pleasure of digital play with the maquiladoras and other global sweatshops that produce video game hardware along with the coltan mines of the war-torn and disease ravished Democratic Republic of the Congo (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), not to mention the frequently exploitive working conditions of software production itself (as mentioned earlier in this chapter). Entangled within this global economic apparatus is the video game content itself; which, as the
Homefront example touched upon in the beginning illustrates, is increasingly invested in the production and consumption of crisis as well. Thus, having emerged during a time of crisis, the Cold War, the video game has gone on to become crisis manifest, in terms of both its production and consumption, as well as content itself.

Notes:

vi This notion of interactivity is something that has been ascribed to our understanding of new media technologies in general, from Web 2.0 applications (e.g., wikis, blogs) to mp3 devices (as in creating our own playlists).

vii The terms sequels, ports, and add-on content refers to three different approaches to extending the value of intellectual property within the video game industry. The concept of sequels is well-known through the practice of other entertainment industries. Ports and add-on content, however, is a relatively unique form of content production for the video game industry. Porting refers to translating the video game code for one platform (e.g., Castlevania: Lords of Shadow for the PS3) so that it can be understood and played on by another machine (e.g., Castlevania: Lords of Shadow for the Xbox 360). Add-on content refers to the practice of unlocking and/or releasing additional game content to an already existing game at some later date.

viii As Lev Manovich (2001) notes, this modularity of new media artifacts, in terms of being able to cut-and-paste previously used objects and/or insert new content without disrupting destroying the original, as a key difference between old and new media. I’d like to suggest, on this note, that this increasingly modular consumption of video game content, in terms of sequels, add-ons, and downloadable content, etc., suggests an altogether different economy of scale is in operation in regards to new media technologies—particular video games—and, hence, ought to be taken into consideration when analyzing processes of new media production and consumption; this point will be taken up throughout this dissertation.

ix That Steve Russell’s game, Spacewar, would come to play a more significant role in the mythos of the video game industry has as much to do with political economic desires as it does with gendered notions of technology and identity. Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) touch upon this gendered resonance when they write that Spacewar “was such an integral expression of the culture of computer-science ‘freaks’” (p. 8). Due to the gendered dynamics of the “second shift” of unwaged work […] Women had less free time at home for hacking,” and thus faced structural barriers to joining these hacker communities (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). The hacker community, and by extension video game community, has come to be a site of masculine desire (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Lalley, 2005).

x Since the hardware crash of 1977, console manufacturers have long sought to exercise monopolistic power—often, though not always, successfully. For instance, in 1980, Atari unsuccessfully took the first third-party game developer, Activision, to court as a means of protecting its financial interests, which was built upon a razor and blades business model (Kent, 2001). After the software crash of 1983, Nintendo would implement a “lock-and-key” device as a means of technologically enforcing its licensing system (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 72). Though start-ups, such as Sega, could successfully compete in the market—though Sega is a special case in that it had years of arcade manufacturing experience—the industry is littered with a plethora of market failures, such as the CDi (1991), 3DO (1993), Atari Jaguar (1993) and Sega Dreamcast (1998), to name a few. Today, monopolistic power is exercised through the procurement of third-party software exclusive licensing deals and/or outright acquisition of third-party developers so as to ensure that some gameplay experiences, in terms of content, are only possible via certain consoles—such as the Halo series for Microsoft platforms (Microsoft, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2010), the Metroid Prime series for Nintendo Platforms (Nintendo, 2002, 2004, 2007), and the Uncharted series for Sony Platforms (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2007, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). A comparative media experience would be if one were only able to watch Modern Family, as a third-party exclusive, on Sony television sets, whereas American Idol, as a multiplayer release, could be watched on any television set. In essence, though alternative models can and do exist to the dominant video game industry model, the monopolistic power of the industry makes it difficult for outside success to be achieved.

xi Though the extent of the actual threat represented by the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles franchise and Nintendo’s precarious longevity may have been overstated, and seem laughable in retrospect, analysts from prominent financial
service companies, such as Standard & Poor’s and Bear Stearns, believed that the video game industry was set for a decline (Reuters, 1989; Tibbits, 1989). Indeed some felt as though Nintendo’s continued dominance was a result of illegal business practices that allowed it to monopolize the market (Christensen, 1989; Welch, 1989; Vranizan, 1989).

Evidence of the accelerated subsumption of video games by Empire, can be witnessed in the “Genesis does what Nintendon’t” campaign, which granted significant screen time to the following games: James “Buster” Douglas Knockout Boxing (Taito, 1988/1990), Joe Montana Football (Sega, 1991), Michael Jackson Moonwalker (Sega, 1991), and Pat Riley Basketball (Sega, 1991). The prominent display of these, particularly at the time, national and international celebrities documents an increased interest in the video game as a lucrative site for global capital.
The lifecycle of a video game console is an important referent when considering the formation of what we can call a particular regime of truth surrounding digital play. This is because the birth of a given console marks a contestation—and continuation—of prior modes of play: contestation, because, were nothing new offered, than why would anyone invest in this new mode of play (as opposed to continue with the old regime); continuation, because, in order to remain legible as a site of digital play, certain conventions must be recognized (though the conventions selected are sure to change over time, and thus defy any ahistorical essence of video games). By means of example, for instance, the Magnavox Odyssey (1972), which is credited with having initiated the first-generation of home video games, established several conventions that are still in use today—most notably the reliance upon the television for visual output and use of physical controllers for player input. In contrast, the Atari 2600 (1977), which was the dominant console of the second-generation of home video games, differentiated itself from prior-generation consoles by utilizing removable cartridges to store game information (as opposed to built-in circuitry or game-modifying jumper cards), but still made use of first-generation conventions such as the television and physical controllers, amongst other things. And today, with the widespread adoption of the Nintendo Wii (2006) and introduction of Sony’s Playstation Move (2010) and Microsoft’s Xbox 360 Kinect (2010), this seventh-generation of video game consoles marks a move away from conventional physical controllers and towards motion controllers whether physically held (e.g., Wii and Move) or motion-captured (e.g., Kinect); thus illustrating the point that we should not interpret a specific video game convention as an ahistorical truth, but rather as the particular articulations of a given regime of truth regarding digital play. To be
clear, then, by regime of truth regarding digital play, I mean to adopt Foucault’s (1978-1979/2008) contention that a regime of truth is a “particular type of discourse and a set of practices” that can bind together a particular set of practices as constituting an “intelligible connection and […] can legislate on these practices in terms of true and false” (p. 18). A video game console, then, is the material manifestation of and claim upon what constitutes a legitimate set of gaming practices.

As I write, we find ourselves bearing witness to the rise and fall of a new regime of truth regarding gaming. This is evidenced by Nintendo lowering its economic outlook by 80% on July 28, 2011 to a level last seen in 1986 (Yasu & Fujimura, 2011). And recently, sales for the video game industry as a whole fell 21% in December 2011 when compared to December 2010, from $5.07b (December 2010) to $3.99b (December 2011) (Savitz, 2012), and saw even further drop off in January 2012, down 40% from $1.14m (January 2011) to $775m (January 2012) (Mazel, 2012). With the political economic foundation of this generation of digital play on shaky ground, speculation has arisen regarding the political economic and technological configuration of the next generation of video gaming (M. Dyer, 2011; George, 2012; IGN Staff, 2012b; Lowe, Sallee, Nelson, Davis, & DeVries, 2011; Morphy, 2011). Missing from this conversation, however, is that of game studies scholarship. This matters for what has manifest as a political economic struggle (in terms of the financial decline of this generation of home consoles) points to the inability for the current generation of video games to continue to operate as a legitimate regime of truth regarding digital play. In other words, though still highly effective in some regards, the current generation of consoles and the software developed for them is no longer able to adequately manage the circuits of production and consumption that operate within contemporary digital play; hence, the need for a new generation of video game consoles, that is, the
establishment of a new regime of truth. And one would imagine that game studies scholarship would be in a unique position to speak to—and potentially intervene upon—this moment.

This has not been the case, however; despite the complex circuits of production and consumption involved in gaming practices, thereby suggesting that contemporary gaming is about more than play—in the narrow sense of the word—much of game studies scholarship has positioned the end-user/producer experience of the console as the privileged site of gaming itself, thus remaining ignorant of the biopolitics of play. That is, limiting the analysis of video games to the experience of the programmer and/or player is to take for granted both the political economic reorganization of various populations according to the circuits of consumption and production of a global video game knowledge economy and the cultural reconfiguration of specific populations according to the political anxieties and desires associated with contemporary capital. Because much of game studies scholarship has primarily concerned itself with whether gaming can best be understood according to literary theory or the formal structures of play (Frasca, 2003; Galloway, 2006; Jenkins, 2003; Juul, 2001; Murray, 1997), the field has found itself limited in its ability to understand how digital play operates as a site of global subject formation: reconfiguring third- and first-world subjects according to the political economic desires and anxieties of a global knowledge economy and positioning those selfsame subjects within a global hierarchy of the right to life and death. To be clear, I do believe that game studies has been productive and important, and consider myself to be indebted to many of the various scholars working within this domain; and yet, I find the field’s premature foreclosure of the terrain of game studies primarily around the question of narratology (i.e., literary theory) or ludology (i.e., play) to have hindered game studies’ ability to speak beyond the limited domain of the end-user/producer experience. So though productive tensions have been produced within game
studies scholarship, with ludologist, for instance, pointing to the limits of textual criticism within a medium in which ideology is embedded within the form (e.g., algorithm) as well as the content (Crogan, 2003; Galloway, 2006; Manovich, 2001), the intervention proposed often remains the same: more complex modes of representation and improved media literacy (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999; Galloway, 2006).

As important as media literacy and issues of representation are and continue to be, however, the field of game studies has largely ignored the complex whole of digital play that works to reproduce and extend itself regardless of content; or rather, just as ideology is embedded within the algorithmic logic of play—so that the fetish of tyranny, for instance, would exist in “god” games whether the narrative content was progressive or conservative (Galloway, 2006)—so too is ideology embedded within the complex circuit of production and consumption itself. And, to the extent that much of game studies scholarship ignores the complex circuits of production and consumption involved in the practice of digital play, then so too do we remain limited in our ability to intervene upon this particular regime of a truth—a regime of truth that I argue, throughout this dissertation, is working in conjunction with global capital to reconfigure the world along the lines of Empire. For though it matters what the content of a given game is, it also matters: if the content of the game is produced upon the backs of exploited workers; if the experience of play (as conventionally conceived) blurs the lines between military and consumer technologies; and, if the practice of play accelerates global consumption; amongst other concerns. Hence, I argue, if we wish to disrupt the operation of contemporary Empire, for those operating within game studies, we must be sure to situate our analysis within the totality that is digital play—even if our intervention remains elsewhere (e.g., narrative or ludology).
Otherwise, we risk misinterpreting the overlapping and sometimes contradictory layers of anxiety and desire operating with the complex whole that is digital play.

What I aim to do in this chapter—and dissertation more generally—is to expand our conception of digital play beyond that of mere end-user/producer and rather to position the experience as a historically and geographically situated practice. Though some have already begun the work of understanding digital play as an ongoing, developing historical and transnational phenomenon (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kerr, 2006; Kline, et al., 2003), more frequently this analysis has been provided so as to position certain times and spaces as being the prehistory of contemporary video games (See: Galloway, 2006; Halter, 2006; Herz, 1997; Kent, 2001), as opposed to documenting these permutations as important genealogies of digital play. Moreover, even the pioneering work of those such as Ian Bogost, Nick Dyer-Witheford, Aphra Kerr, Stephen Kline, Nick Montfort, and Greig de Peuter have had difficulty speaking about digital play as a practice that extends beyond an explicit connection with the gaming machine itself (See: Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kerr, 2006; Kline, et al., 2003; Montfort & Bogost, 2009). So even though these aforementioned scholars have done fantastic work illustrating the importance of conceiving of political economy and technology studies as an essential—and often understudied—element of video games, there has been an aversion towards conducting a totalizing analysis of digital play in the scope of, for example, Paul Virilio’s (1984/2009) *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* or Michel Foucault’s (1975/1995) *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. That is, there has been aversion within game studies to an analysis of video games that attempts to show how we cannot understand our contemporary moment unless we remain cognizant of how digital play has come to operate as an important site of global anxiety and desire (Crogan, 2011)—much as the prison operated as an
important site for the production of modern modes of governance (Foucault, 1975/1995) and cinema technologies dramatically transformed military science (Virilio, 1984/2009).xiii

The task, then, is to begin with the premise that the thing we call gaming does not exist. Such a premise is needed, for in taking the essence of gaming for granted—that is, in mistaking the site of end-user production and/or consumption as being coterminous with the essence of play itself—game studies has left uninterrogated how digital play has been structured in its totality to operate as an important site wherein which global capital is working to reconfigure the world along the lines of Empire. Hence, the supposition that gaming does not exist can offer a fruitful means for moving the discussion of this complex phenomenon beyond the stumbling block that is the thing in itself (e.g., the conventional understanding of digital play); for as Michel Foucault (1978-1979/2008) has argued, “If we suppose that it does not exist, then what can history make of these different events and practices which are apparently organized around something that is supposed to be madness [disease, delinquency, sexuality, or for our purposes, gaming]?” (p. 3). To answer this question, our analysis, thus, must shift away from the thing itself and instead towards those set of practices which exist to suggest that “gaming,” “video games,” “digital play,” or whatever other privileged term we might use, does indeed exist. That is: (1) what practices have come into existence so as to ensure that contemporary digital play is possible? And, (2) what practices have emerged which depend upon a particular configuration of digital play for its existence? Answering these questions is the key to exposing the regime of truth which has set itself up surrounding the question of digital play; for shifts in definitions regarding the proper domain of gaming work to reconfigure the lived experiences of those who not only play games but those who do not play as well. This is because gaming is no longer, if it ever was, about the producer and consumer existing within a closed system of play, but rather
that of a complex network of production and consumption wherein the political economic and
cultural configuration—that is ontological configuration—of various populations are, and have
been, reconfigured so as to respond to the anxieties and desires of the regime of truth that we call
digital play—and by extension, its underwriting agency, contemporary Empire.

To undertake this attempt at grasping the totality of contemporary digital play, for the
sake of understanding its historical relation to modern global politics, the framework I am
proposing, of which I believe is capable of being up to the task, is that of a fusion of Foucault’s
(1978-1979/2008) notion of regimes of truth and Heidegger’s (1954/1977a) concept of
enframing. Though these two approaches have much in common, in that both are concerned with
how the real comes into existence (what Heidegger refers to as *Aletheia* and Foucault as
veridiction), the differences between them make holding these two frameworks in tension
productive: Foucault’s notion of regimes of truth contains an element of fluidity lacking in
Heidegger’s more categorically rigorous concept of enframing. In other words, I will be relying
on Heidegger’s categorical rigor so as to orient Foucault’s ability to make sense of seemingly
contradictory practices (without resorting to dialectical, true or false, reasoning). In this regard,
Heidegger ensures that I do not forget my first objective (grasping the totality of gaming)
whereas Foucault compels me to remember the second (understanding the contradictions of
gaming). Though this theoretical blend, I hope to produce a methodology capable of: (1)
grasping a totality of digital play that does not define gaming a priori; and, (2) making sense of
the contradictions that have emerged within contemporary game studies without being forced
to resort to an unproductive either/or, non-contradictory stance. For the challenge in unmasking any
regime of truth is not to begin with a universal concept and then put “it through the grinder of
history,” but rather to ask what are we to “make of these different events and practices which are
apparently organized around something that is” supposed to exist (Foucault, 1978-1979/2008, p. 3). To this end, this chapter is structured as follows: (1) I conceive of digital play as operating across an array of practices and modes of occasioning; (2) I suggest that the overriding logic of digital play is that of the production of what I call hardcore subjectivities (i.e., lovers of digital play); and, (3) I argue that the political economic and cultural logic of digital play is overdetermined (though not absolutely irresistible) by virtue of the multiple channels through which it operates.

**Grasping the Totality of That Which Does Not Exist**

What the term “gaming” references is not a thing, but an ongoing set of contested practices organized around the production of a particular regime of truth called gaming. That is, the proper referent for the thing we call gaming is not that of a particular act (e.g., playing a game), specific technology (e.g., a console), or even an economic field (e.g., the video game industry), but rather a particular constellation of practices and discourses that function together to uphold a particular configuration of global—but not universal—subject formation. Hence, the lifecycle of a video game generation is an important referent point for this analysis because the introduction of a new video game console operates not as another step in the teleology of digital play—from prehistory to the present and future beyond—but rather functions as an intervention upon the existent formation of the totality of digital play. In other words, the substructure of the video game console is not that of mere technology but rather that of a particular political economic and cultural assemblage. The significance of the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, for instance, is not that they ushered forth a new generation of high-definition gaming, thereby making photorealistic video game graphics possible, but rather that to make it so that high-definition gaming itself was even possible and desirable, a whole assemblage of political economic and cultural practices had
to come into existence that had not hitherto existed; for instance: photorealism—as opposed to
cel-shaded, hand-drawn, or other aesthetic styles—had to be positioned as offering the most
compelling mode of visual representation, which has the effect of linking realism to a particular
threshold of visual fidelity; and, a political economic network of high-definition production and
consumption—in terms of television sets, Blu-ray disks, and more—had to be established so as
to keep the system flowing smoothly; et cetera. It is this ontological gravity of technology, its
ability to reconfigure political economic and cultural systems, that Heidegger (1954/1977a) is
referencing when he warns that we do not understand technology if our primary means of
conceptualization remains bound to that of an apparatus. And, I argue, we do not understand
video games if we remain ignorant of this larger political economic and cultural gravity that
extends beyond the domain of digital play as conventionally understood.

This criticism aside, however; though I mean to shift the attention of game studies away
from the stumbling block that is gaming itself—insofar as the term obscures the totality of the
phenomenon it proposes to analyze—this does not mean that the field has failed to produce
provocative insights. Indeed, contemporary game studies has produced substantial work within
the domain of five overlapping practices (though most scholars privilege one area or another):
reception/operation, interface, form/function, code, and/or platform studies (Montfort & Bogost,
2009). These various domains will be discussed in what follows, but it is sufficient for now to
point out that though Montfort and Bogost (2009) note that these five practices of digital play are
always situated in culture and context, this sixth domain is marked as external to the proper
analysis of digital play. To the extent that Montfort and Bogost (2009) are representative of
much of game studies scholarship, this marks an inability for the field to conceive of digital play
as a set of political economic and cultural practices that extend beyond the site of the video game
as conventionally conceived. That is, culture is not the context of digital play, but rather digital play comes into existence only through political economic and cultural circuits of production and consumption. This is not a matter of mere rhetoric (as if rhetoric were ever merely rhetoric), but rather in conceiving of the video game as standing apart from culture, the field of game studies reproduces the inadequate binary of “technological determinism” and “symptomatic technology” that Raymond Williams (1974/2005) had critiqued so long ago (p. 4-8). In either case, as Raymond Williams (1974/2005) argued, each perspective obscures the cultural politics invested in the production of technology, so that one is left with only two choices regarding the seemingly inevitable progression of technological development: either embrace it (Jenkins, 2006; McGonigal, 2011) or approach cautiously (Hess, 2007; Postman, 1985/2005). From both perspectives, then, technological development is defined as an inevitable, linear trajectory, thereby both limiting the possibilities for intervention and failing to understand how this particular technological configuration was activated in itself (R. Williams, 1974/2005).

Hence, for the sake of distilling into manageable units of analysis the various practices upon which contemporary digital play comes into existences, I make use of Heidegger’s (1954/1977a, 1950/1977) conception of technology as being spread amongst a constellation of five modes of deployment, what he calls occasioning—that is, site of operation/emergence. These fives modes of occasioning are: the material, the form, the purpose, the producer, and the technological real (Heidegger, 1954/1977a, pp. 6, 11-12). Of these, Heidegger (1954/1977a) places most emphasis on the fifth element, the technological real, as it represents the context which makes the four other forms possible. The real is that which has been granted the legitimacy of the possible (Boellstorff, 2008; Foucault, 1978-1979/2008); and hence, all other modes of occasioning are granted legitimacy in correspondence to their relation to that which
already exists (Foucault, 1978-1979/2008). That said, the four other elements of occasioning possess particular political power as the possibility exists for their redeployment under the regime of the imaginary—the necessary means for the creation of an ontological otherwise (Boellstorff, 2008; Foucault, 1978-1979/2008). What these analytical concepts of “occasioning” offer, then, is a productive means of separating the various discourses and practices associated with a given regime of truth into manageable parts—and thus, serve as a reminder to the critic of the totality that is that selfsame regime of truth. In other words, to extend Galloway’s (2006) ludic critique of narratology—that ideology reproduces itself at the level of the algorithm, so that narratology without ludology is incomplete—so too could we argue that ideology reproduces itself at every point within the system, in terms of: the materials used to manufacture video game consoles and software; the form of gameplay conventions and purpose of stories told; the raced, classed, gendered, and national composition of the producers (and consumers) of digital play; and, the reliance upon already existent circuits of production and consumption of digital play so as to remain legible—for countergaming is still gaming. Hence, we could argue that the countergaming movement so eagerly sought after by Galloway (2006) and others, for instance, would reproduce the same political economic and cultural structures as the dominant video game industry—with some variation of course—if it remains ignorant of the other significant modes of occasioning involved in the production and consumption of digital play, that is: what is the material threshold for contemporary forms of digital play (i.e., the material); what is the ideological effect/desire that is embedded within the narrative and algorithmic code of the video game (i.e., form); who serves as the producer and consumer, and why (i.e., producer and purpose of play); and what is the historical and geopolitical moment that gives meaning to this particular configuration of digital play as a site of anxiety and desire (i.e., the technological real). These are
the questions one must remember to ask if one is interested in grasping the totality of the regime of truth we call digital play.\textsuperscript{xv} Hence, the following paragraphs will: (1) discuss in greater detail all five modes of occasioning as offering useful analytics for understanding and intervening upon the regime of truth that is contemporary gaming; and (2), simultaneously redeploy the existing game studies scholarship along the lines of this proposed framework.

\textit{The Material of Play}

The material components of a particular technology are perhaps the most inert and seemingly least capable of possessing an affect upon the upholding of a particular regime of digital play. It is no surprise then that unit of analysis has remained relatively neglected by game studies scholarship (for an exception, see: Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kline, et al., 2003). Indeed, the most comprehensive work currently to be found on the history of the material form of gaming can typically be found not in academic game studies scholarship, but that of popular press, amateur game historians, such as that of David Sheff (1993/1999), J.C. Herz (1997), and Steven Kent (2001). The reasoning for this dearth of academic attention to the materiality of play may be explained in that, outside of political economists such as Klein, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter (2003), the materiality of play makes for good institutional and interpersonal drama, but seems to speak little to the actual experience of game production and consumption, in terms of content, code, or interface. Other than the amusement of knowing that Atari dumped millions of \textit{Pac-Man} (Atari, 1982) and other cartridges in a New Mexico landfill or that an alleged worldwide microprocessor shortage caused significant friction between Nintendo and it’s non-Japanese publishers (Herz, 1997; Kent, 2001; Sheff, 1993/1999), what do such histories have to teach us about game production and consumption, other than that the video game industry is as
cutthroat and competitive as any other capitalist enterprise? An important insight into the totality that is gaming, I argue.

The materials needed to manufacture a given technology, let alone video games, are not distributed nor consumed and disposed of evenly or even properly across the surface and depths of the earth. To the extent that the manufacture, consumption, and disposal of video game technology is a necessary and material requisite to any experience of gaming, then the act of gaming prefigures a particular ontological relationship between resources to people and people to people. By this, I mean first, that the act of gaming has an effect upon the relationship between people and their environment, regardless of whether one is a gamer or not. For instance, the original PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 models, and to a lesser extent their revised newer editions (PS3 Slim and Xbox 360 S), consumed a relatively high amount of energy—five times and three times as much as that of a medium-size refrigerator respectively (Duncombe, 2008)—when compared to other sources of electronic entertainment: 189w (PS3), 172w (Xbox 360), 88w (Xbox 360 S), 85w (PS3 Slim), 22w (Blu-ray player), and 16w (Nintendo Wii) (Hittinger, 2011; Moskovciak & Katzmaier, 2009). Though this environmental cost, in terms of energy production, can be mitigated by engaging in proper gaming practices (such as limiting console idle time) (Hittinger, 2011), end-user practice is not the only source of energy consumption involved in the practices of gaming, as we must also account for the energy consumption involved in the production of the game itself: the computers in which the games are designed upon; the production of the hardware and software for each gaming device; the packaging and advertising material supporting each game and platform; et cetera. The waste created in the production, consumption, and disposal involved in each of these various practices to is part “of the extraordinarily toxic e-waste that is regularly shipped to mountainous dumps around the
world, especially in Africa, India, and China” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 224). Though I do not mean to claim that gaming alone is responsible for the contemporary politics of energy production, consumption, and disposal—a complex whole that involves environmental concerns, economic policy, and international politics, amongst other things—I do mean to suggest that gaming practices are a necessary site for understanding how Empire works to create surplus pleasure through the extraction and disposal of displeasure from first- to third-world countries (See Lewis, 2011). In other words, game studies scholars are unethical if they praise the possibilities of play while leaving unremarked the environmental and political economic impact of digital play aside—that is, praise first-world outcomes while ignoring third-world consequences.

This leads to my second point, in that the production, consumption, and disposal of video game technology prefigures a particular ontological relationship between resources to people and people to people through the economic practices that have sprung up around gaming production and consumption. In terms of production, increasing scrutiny has been directed towards the procurement of the materials used within contemporary video game devices. For instance, it is believed that the global demand for tantalum, a rare, dense, and highly conductive metal used in the production electronic components, has contributed to the political and economic instability of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which is home to a large reservoir of the world’s coltan deposits (the mineral from which tantalum is derived) (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Hayes & Burge, 2003; Peckham, 2008). Though coltan extraction initially paid relatively well in DRC terms—from roughly USD $7 in 2001 to approximately USD 50¢ as of 2011—the mining camps were and continue to be “notorious centers of the area’s rampaging HIV epidemic, […] overseen and protected from rivals by militias, often composed of juvenile soldiers toting
AK-47s and rocket launchers, who [are] in turn paid from coltan revenues” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 223; See also: Dizolele, 2007; Domoney, Taylor, Tait, & Bennett, 2011). Though these practices technically ended in 2003 following a peace accord between the DRC and Rwanda (and by extension the western-based mining companies that partnered with the Rwandan government), reports from the DRC continue to document ongoing violence, labor exploitation, and widespread sexual assault against women (Dizolele, 2007; Domoney, et al., 2011; Peckham, 2008). Horrible as this is, the mines of the DRC represent just one spot along the circuit of production, consumption, and disposal that includes hardware assembly sweatshops in places such as Guadalajara, Mexico, Zalaegerszeg and Sárvár, Hungary, and Doumen and Shenzhen, China (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; B. Weir, 2012).

Though the examples cited above do not necessarily impact the content that appears within the moment of gameplay itself, as do decisions in the form of play (e.g., coding and platform design), how can this material infrastructure not constitute an important site of occasioning for the practice of gaming itself? For it is only when defining gaming in the narrow sense, as that which happens between the player and the screen or the programmer and the screen, can game studies scholarship proclaim, “Game On! Or How I learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Xbox” (Postigo, 2009). The material practices that constitute one mode of the regime of truth called gaming may not define the totality of gaming itself, but it nevertheless remains an essential constraint upon the essence of the act. Far from being a site of pure immaterial labor, the material fact of gaming, in terms of production, consumption, and disposal, means that the regime of truth called gaming has consequences beyond those who sit in front of the screen—whether as consumer or producer. One does not play at the mines of the DRC, the toxic landfills of e-waste, nor the sweatshops where hardware is manufactured, and yet these are
concrete sites of gaming. Game studies scholarship, however, has remained largely ignorant of these circuits of production and consumption, and thus inadvertently contributes to the obscuration of these substructures of digital play; as Kent Ono and Derek Buescher (2001) have argued, our overattention to narrowly defined sites of production and consumption “distracts attention from the processes that those [sites have] drawn on to create social meanings” (p. 38). As will be discussed further in the upcoming chapters of analysis, this tension between play and labor, pleasure and exploitation, life and death—that is, the question of global subject formation and population management, what Foucault (1978-1979/2008) called biopolitics— is a necessary site of analysis that can only be acknowledged if we expand our conception of gaming to include the material in addition to the immaterial. This is not merely a question of intellectual completeness, but rather an ethical obligation, for how can we speak to the state of contemporary digital play if we remain ignorant of how gaming constitutes a site wherein our pleasure, way of life, is guaranteed by virtue of their displeasure, their forfeiture of life.

The Form of Play

The form of a particular technology is perhaps more easily understood as possessing an ontological investment because of the presence of intentionality that exists at both its moment of production and consumption. For this reason, it is of little surprise that this element of gaming has given birth to an array of divergent, if not increasingly overlapping, critical approaches to the study of games dependent upon whether one seeks to understand how form (whether conceived as text, platform, and/or experience) influences practices of production or consumption: psychoanalysis, media effects, and audience studies tends to focus on the consumption side; code and platform studies tend to be concerned with the production side; and, those concerned with the “game itself,” in terms of narrative (i.e., narratology), game rules (i.e., ludology), and/or
interface, frequently take up critical residence in the internal world of play itself (e.g., the narrative, rules, and/or interface of the machine) (Montfort & Bogost, 2009). These divergent approaches to game studies all operate under a concern for the form of play to the extent that they are all interested in what Heidegger (1954/1977a) defines as the “shape into which the material enters” (p. 6), and to which we could add exits. This concern for the form of play has dominated game studies, and hence has been a productive and important site of scholarship. And yet, perhaps precisely due to its productivity, this research has generated significant tensions and contradictions within this area of study—of which the debate between narratology and ludology is perhaps most popular within the field, whereas the contradictions between media effects is most commented upon outside the discipline. For this reason, it is worthwhile to briefly attempt to make sense of these various approaches to the study of the form of gaming, and the implications these tensions and contradictions have for the notion of gaming itself.

Of the various approaches to the study of the form of gaming, those concerned with the moment of gameplay itself have been most popular (Montfort & Bogost, 2009). This means that the analysis of consumption, in terms of reception, interface, narrative, and the rules of play, has dominated the study of form. The tensions between and within these various approaches have been productive on their own terms, in addition to drawing attention to the need for alternative, complementary approaches that may be able to make sense of these tensions; for instance, the need for an analytic capable of situating the phenomenon of digital play as part of larger social ecology—and thus capable of seeing audiences (i.e., reception) as capable of possessing desires similar to those already embedded within the cultural logic of video game play, so that the question is not necessarily what effect do video games have on audiences, but rather how is it that this form of cultural desire (i.e., the video game) has come to be legible at this particular
moment. Though this question is frequently beyond the scope of conventional game studies, this ought to not hinder our ability to mobilize some of its insights towards our respective project of understanding gaming as a regime of truth; that is, what might reception studies, narratology, and ludology contribute towards our understanding of the totality of digital play.

In terms of reception, four key insights are that of: hyperrepresentation, the Julia effect, the ELIZA effect, and audience desire. First, I use the term Hyperrepresentation to capture a highly productive, if not controversial, mode of scholarship concerned with understanding the effects the exaggerated representations of sexuality, gender, and violence frequently found in video games (e.g., *Tomb Raider*, *Dead or Alive*, *Grand Theft Auto*) have on those who play games. Though some of the scholarship within this subfield has generated criticism for allegedly exaggerating the negative effects of gaming (i.e., making a mountain out of a molehill) (D. Williams & Skoric, 2005) and of scapegoating the medium through abstraction (e.g., why is *Grand Theft Auto* any worse than *Training Day*) (Sadler, 2010), these studies concerned with hyperrepresentation have generated interesting results, at least in terms of data if not always interpretation. For instance, it is important to know that the appearance of female characters in video games is abysmally low and when it does appear is frequently troubling, as women are often represented through the confining role of hypersexuality (Dietz, 1998); and it is equally important to know that in spite of games with female dominated casts, such as *Dead or Alive: Paradise* (Tecmo Koei, 2010b), the overall proportion of female to male characters has remained relatively unchanged at 14% for the past decade (Downs & Smith, 2010). Moreover, as the marketers of *Dead or Alive: Paradise* readily capitalize on (See Figures 2.1–4), representation in itself is not to be desired if it only means being portrayed as victims or sex objects (Dietz, 1998). Other studies concerned with the effects of hyperrepresentation have shown similar results.
Figures 2.1-2. (top-bottom). This scene from *Dead or Alive Paradise* (Tecmo Koei, 2010b) is quite illustrative of what the producers had in mind for the game. But if the cut-scene were not clear enough (See Figure 2.1), then this commercial for the game, titled “Spanking the Monkey,” (Figure 2.2) makes it difficult to misunderstand the message (See also Figures 2.3-4).

regarding the underrepresentation and problematic portrayal of non-white characters and the saturation of violence within video games (D. Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009;
These additional commercials for *Dead or Alive: Paradise* further cement the sexualized intent of the game. In the first (Figure 2.3), titled “Midnight Snack” (Tecmo Koei, 2010c), a man walks in a sleepy daze towards his refrigerator, pulls out a piece of raw meat, then proceeds to smack it with a mallet for a short time, before putting everything away and heading back to bed. The second (Figure 2.4), titled “Caught in the Act” (Tecmo Koei, 2010a), shows a woman waiting slowly for her garage door to open, only to see her husband standing in the garage choking a chicken.

Scharrer, 2004). The challenge for those concerned with the effects of hyperrepresentation upon game players has been precisely in the question of how to measure those effects, as it is not
enough to document the quantitative imbalance of representation between dominant and marginalized groups; indeed, tension within the ranks of effects researchers has emerged to suggest that the quantitative effects of video game hyperrepresentation upon a given player’s real-world behavior is negligible (D. Williams & Skoric, 2005).

In contrast, though not necessarily in opposition, to the methodological challenges experienced by those studying the effects of hyperrepresentation, a vibrant tradition of audience studies has sought to sidestep the issue of effects measurement through the use of interviews and participate-observation analysis. Here, the question is less of what effect does the engagement with the video game form have upon the player, but rather that of what user desires does the video game form satisfy? Approaching the gaming encounter in terms of desire as opposed to effects has led some to challenge the findings of those invested in the study of the negative effects of hyperrepresentation. Henry Jenkins (2006), for instance, has noted that though the form of video games, and digital media more generally, may have an effect upon a user’s experience, ultimately the interpretive gaps already existing within the game, as well as those opened up by virtue of the users' creative energies, make gaming a site of audience desire. Jenkins deployment of de Certeau’s (1980/1988) notion of tactics and strategies—e.g., play versus control—has functioned as a productive counterweight to the sometimes deterministic, seemingly inevitable results of hyperrepresentation research. And yet, as others have noted, the experience of pleasure and play are not antithetical to systems of control and the problematics of power this entails (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Stone, 1995/1998). Indeed, the documentation of the Julia effect (treating computer programs as if they have desires and intentions) and ELIZA effect (treating computer programs as more intelligent than they really are) demonstrate that gaming constitutes a serious site of engagement for those who play; that
players come to treat game characters (particularly computer controlled) as intelligent, desiring, complex subjects, suggests that gaming has become an increasingly important site of identity work (Boellstorff, 2008; Turkle, 1995/1997). To the extent that this is true, then a new challenge emerges of understanding what opportunities for identity work exist within the form of gaming itself; and now we have shifted our analysis from an understanding of the relationship between the player and the form of the video game to the internal world of play itself.

The internal world of play can be thought of as form proper, insofar as the concern is that of understanding the rules of the game (ludology) and/or the formal characteristics of the video game content (narratology) (Montfort & Bogost, 2009). In other words, from this perspective, one is not necessarily concerned with how the form of the video game impedes upon the production and/or consumption of game content, but rather one aims to practice a sort of new media formalism: with “‘the game itself’ replacing the New Critics’ ‘text in itself’ as the hermetically sealed object of attention, rules and procedures replacing troupes and symbols as the features to be analyzed in isolation of authorial, historical, or cultural factors” (S. E. Jones, 2008, p. 5). Though this formalist approach may place unfair burdens on the form of the video game, such as in critiquing Medal of Honor: Rising Sun (Electronic Arts, 2003b) for not being able to fully represent war (See Hess, 2007), or alternatively risk defining the medium tautologically, in that games are simulation and that the presence of narrative is merely a relic of past media behavior (See Frasca, 2003), studies of the gaming form itself can help to illuminate the unique qualities of the digital play experience (S. E. Jones, 2008).

As with the studies regarding videogame reception, several key concepts have sprung up around the studies of the video game form itself; of these, narrative architecture and algorithmic logic are of particular import. The first, narrative architecture, is a term coined by Henry Jenkins
(2003) as a means to make sense of the theoretical blockage experienced within the debate regarding games as narrative versus games as simulation. The debate focused in on whether games, and video games specifically, were best understood according to logics of storytelling or play (See: Frasca, 2003; Galloway, 2006; S. E. Jones, 2008). Jenkins (2003) conception of narrative architecture sought to reconcile these differences by applying de Certeau’s (1980/1988) notion of walking rhetorics towards the understanding of game content. The notion of walking rhetorics is built upon the premise that the construction of city space constitutes a series of strategies meant to promote certain mobile practices above the others. These mobile practices give ideological content to the citizen’s life insofar as some spaces are defined as the proper or improper domain for the functioning of various individuals (de Certeau, 1980/1988). And yet, even within a well-defined, structured city space, gaps exist that citizens exploit on a daily basis (de Certeau, 1980/1988), such as when protesting at a site designated for celebration, thereby suggesting that movement itself implies an ideological choice.xix Taking this framework, Jenkins (2003) argues that, like city planners, “game designers don’t simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces.” This definition of game content as narrative architecture, hence, attempts to translate narrative theory into terms acceptable to the logic of rule-based play: rules are structures meant to encourage the player to partake in a particular narrative trajectory.xx

Though coming from a different theoretical perspective (ludology), the notion of algorithmic logic complements narrative architecture, insofar as algorithms are not synonymous with rules, as rules refer to the parameters of the playing field (e.g., hit the ball inside this hole to win; the playfield must be of this length and consist of this material) whereas algorithms refer to the specific operations required to excel within the gamexxi; in other words, to use golf as an example, rules reference the objective and scoring system (e.g., hit the ball into the hole; incur
penalty for hitting the ball out of bounds), whereas an algorithm would be the step-by-step development and implementation of a proper swing so as to better fulfill the objective of golf. In this regard, the form of the video game is that of an algorithmic machine meant to discipline the player along a particular skill set (Crogan, 2003). And to the extent the game as algorithmic machine succeeds, “we are asked to mistake the structure of somebody’s else mind for our own” (Manovich, 2001, p. 61). This is a strong claim, and some might ask what ideology, let alone narrative, could emerge from the rules and algorithms of a game as abstract as, for example, golf or its video game equivalent (e.g., the Tiger Woods PGA Tour series [Electronic Arts, 2010f]). A preliminary reply would be that embedded within the logic of a game such as golf are stories of: a particular ideology of skill as power (e.g., the power of a golf swing comes more from form rather than brute force); a celebration of technological wealth (e.g., golf is a game that requires a relatively high level of income to participate); and dominance over nature (e.g., golf courses are highly planned, artificial terrain). In other words, just as forms of non-digital play are sites of complex cultural practices (James, 1963/1993), so too does the form of digital gaming compel participants to reproduce such cultural logics. This is done in video games through the rearticulation of life as that of an algorithm; that is, digital play distills the essence of a given problem (e.g., the economy, conflict, etc.) and then offers an idealized series of specific steps (i.e., the algorithm) as the most appropriate means of resolving the situation (Crogan, 2003; Galloway, 2006). In other words, video games offer an image of the world, and then make an explicit claim (through gameplay) as to the best course of action for operating in this particular conception of reality, and the player’s success is contingent upon the adoption of this standpoint, at least for the duration of play—and to the extent that at least some aspects of this domain of play are believed to be realistic, then perhaps this particular standpoint lingers even longer.
Clearly, then, the field of game studies has offered much to work with in terms of the significance of digital play for contemporary society: reception studies have documented how users come to treat video games as objects of anxiety and desire, thereby suggesting the possibility for cultural convergence (as in gaming culture and “non”-gaming culture) (Boellstorff, 2008; Dietz, 1998; Turkle, 1995/1997); and narrative and ludic analysis, though often disagreeing in terms of methodology, have produced similar arguments regarding the politics embedded within the form of digital play (whether in terms of story or the algorithm) (Crogan, 2003; Galloway, 2006; Jenkins, 2003; Murray, 1997). Far from being an innocent substructure upon which an individual engages in play, these studies have suggested that the conventions of digital play “proper”—that is, in terms of narrative and ludic elements—is intimately tangled up within the person who has taken on the role of player. The power of this entanglement, or rather the pleasure of this entanglement (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), is that it leads one “to mistake the structure of somebody else’s mind for our own” (Manovich, 2001, p. 61). And yet, what does it mean to take pleasure in this mistake? What does it mean to enjoy one’s symptom? What is the purpose of this power manifest as desire?

Though the politics of a given technology are embedded in the form taken upon—amongst other sites of occasioning (Heidegger, 1954/1977a)—rarely has conventional game studies left this narrowly defined site of digital play (i.e., that is form) to venture into the politics of the production of digital play itself. This has had the effect of inadvertently delinking the domain of conventional game studies, conceived in terms of the analysis of a specific technology (the video game), from the field of political economic and cultural analysis; or rather, a binary is constructed between technology and the larger social ecology in that though they may interact and influence the other, they remain autonomous sites of practice (See Montfort & Bogost,
A rich tradition of cultural studies, and continental theory, amongst other theoretical traditions, however, has cast doubt upon the construction and politics of this binary (Foucault, 1978-1979/2008; Heidegger, 1954/1977a; R. Williams, 1974/2005). As such, though it may be useful analytically to speak of technology and culture, we must remember, however, that when we speak of technology, in actuality we are referencing an ensemble of material infrastructures and political economic practices, in addition to immaterial cultural practices (e.g., content); in other words, the differentiation is not between that of culture and technology, but rather that of various material and immaterial culture practices (technai). At times, conventional game studies scholarship can point towards this larger problematic—such as when Gonzalo Frasca (2003) writes that the game developer “always has the final word and remains in charge” (p. 233) or when Janet Murray (1997) notes that “interactors can only act within the possibilities that have been established by the writing and programming” (p. 152)—but even then, the concern rarely goes beyond the level of form: how is this interest encoded, and not necessarily what is this interest that is encoded?

That said, though conventional game studies scholarship rarely looks for the politics that inform the production of a particular platform style (e.g., the intention that stands behind a given form), recent work has shown that the crystallization of a given console form has a significant effect on subsequent software development (Montfort & Bogost, 2009). Choices in everything from how many input devices a platform can recognize, the capacity and speed of the storage device used, to the processing power of the machine, and other platform design factors, have a significant effect on what games are made for a console and how those games are received (Montfort & Bogost, 2009). Hence, the need for game studies to take into consideration the purposes and producers standing behind the conventionally defined domain of digital play.
The Purpose of Play, And its Producers

It has come to be intellectually taboo to claim that technology has a purpose. Contemporary scholarship has labeled the works of Heidegger (1954/1977a), Jacques Ellul (1954/1964), Neal Postman (1985/2005), and Paul Virilio (1984/2009) as deterministic, and as having mistaken the political design of a given technology as being coterminous with the technology itself (Feenberg, 2002; Hardt & Negri, 2001; Sassen, 2011b). The contention is that we ought to understand new communication technologies as part of a larger social ecology, rather than as a purely technical condition, so as to “make conceptual and empirical room for the broad range of social logics driving users and the diverse cultures of use through which these technologies are employed” (Sassen, 2011a). This seems to me, however, to be exactly what those labeled as technological determinist have sought to accomplish:

What is important is not the adaptability of Man [sic], but the adaptability of men [sic]. We shall find the answer [of the consequences of technological use], not in the immortal soul of the Species, best in the preservation of our own individual souls, which are, perhaps, not immortal. (Ellul, 1954/1964, pp. 397-398)

The purpose, then, of a given technology, from the standpoint of “technological determinism,” is not that of the creation of a particular universal subject (e.g., technology is bad or good for all people equally), but rather that of transforming the ontological structure of a given space and time (Heidegger, 1954/1977a, 1938/1977); in other words, though, for example, one may debate the political uses and consequences of the telegraph (and by extension the telephone and Internet), most would accept that these technologies have reconfigured our conceptions of space and time according to the logics of their operation (Carey, 1975/2009). It is the latter part of this statement that constitutes the primary concern of those labeled as technological determinist: “that which gives bounds […] is called in Greek telos, which is all too often translated as ‘aim’ or ‘purpose,’ and so misinterpreted” (Heidegger, 1954/1977a, p. 8). Hence bound up in this notion
of the purpose of technology is that of making a space for the entanglement of multiple purposes—e.g., the contingency requested by Saskia Sassen (2011a, 2011b) for making conceptual and empirical room for the broad range of social logics through which technologies are employed (Boellstorff, 2008). Technology, thus, is that site upon which a multitude of purposes, to various extents and effects, converge, and thus are transformed; the creation and expansion of the telegraph in the United States, for instance, was motivated not just by military science and the financial interests of private enterprise (Starr, 2004; Wu, 2010) but also by that of the legitimate anxieties of a nation searching for a means “to bind the country together just as the portents of the Civil War were threatening to tear it apart” (Carey, 1983/2009, p. 159). Hence, it seems worthwhile to ask what interests, desires, and anxieties, have coalesced, and thus informed (e.g., given purpose to) the production of contemporary digital play.

Indeed, many investigative journalists and critical game studies researchers have already begun to take up this question of the interests that inform the production of play. Of central concern for those coming from this perspective is that of the historical involvement—and ongoing involvement—of the military-industrial complex. Though some have downplayed the military-industrial complex’s ongoing involvement with the video game industry, suggesting that gaming developed as a sort of benevolent parasite to the more insidious military interests and continues to subvert those interests (Jenkins, 2006), others have offered compelling evidence that the military continues to play an active and important role in the formation of contemporary digital play (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Halter, 2006; R. Stahl, 2006, 2010b). Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) have gone further to suggest that the video game industry emerged during a period of shifts in global capital, and now operates as an important node in the circuit of production, reproduction, and, by extension, possible subversion of
contemporary Empire. This claim of gaming as part and parcel of Empire, though grand, actually resonates with contemporary industry practices more so than those which would relegate the interests of finance and militarism as superfluous to gaming—interesting contextual elements, but not core processes of gaming in and of itself.

And yet, Empire has invested heavily into the production of contemporary gaming practices. That the military-academic complex served as the technological incubator, in terms of financial and technological resources, for the development of the first video game, *Spacewar!* (S. Russell, 1962), and home video game console, Ralph Baer’s “Brown Box” (later licensed as the Magnavox odyssey; See Herz, 1997), ought not to be understood as the beginning and the end of imperial desire within video games. Early digital play depended upon and co-emerged alongside hacker culture, and despite being counter-cultural in some aspects, however, other elements of this group meshed quite well with the “free-market fever [of an] America about to elect Ronald Reagan as president” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 11). And, far from being a counter-cultural movement, the video game industry has long functioned, metaphorically speaking, as “a nerd who just wants to be popular” (Jason Hart, as qtd. in Lalley, 2005, p. 44).

In addition to influencing the cultural desires of those working within the video game industry, however, the interests of Empire have had a significant hand in the development of gaming technology itself. It was out of financial interests, for instance, that the Atari 2600 was manufactured with the MOS 6507 processor, as opposed to the already inexpensive MOS 6502 (Montfort & Bogost, 2009). This decision, along with that of limiting the use of other expensive components, and selling the machine at cost, made the Atari 2600 an extremely popular and cost effective platform upon which the home gaming industry could develop; and yet, at the same time, the constraints of hardware design—in terms of maximum memory capacity—
technologically encouraged the development of short (or long and repetitive) gaming experiences. Hence, embedded within the Atari 2600 technology is an economic logic of the razor and blades business model: the system had to be made inexpensive so that consumers could afford it; in making the system inexpensive, game developers were limited in the storage capacity needed to make multi-session gaming possible (for instance, the fabled *Adventure* [1979], considered the birth of the adventure gaming genre, could be completed within 2 minutes; Montfort & Bogost, 2009); and, this limited duration of play encouraged the purchase of the additional cartridges that Atari needed consumers to buy so as to break even, let alone profit, since the machine was sold at cost. This mode of production built upon the incessant need to sell multiple cartridges so as to break even for every Atari console sold, a necessity that was embedded within the technology itself, is believed to have caused the industry crash of 1983; the gaming industry devoured itself in that new software was needed not only to generate profit but also alleviate the costs generated as a result of an ever expanding platform base. This dialectic of software versus platform—in that software was needed to cover the costs of platform production, which simultaneously increased demand for more platform production—which was embedded within the technology, as the result of the pressures of finance capital, encouraged an increasing reliance upon licensed software, and gross knockoffs, which were meant to generate sales by virtue of their likeness as opposed to content (Montfort & Bogost, 2009); ultimately, the industry crashed in 1983 as a result of consumers no longer being able to recognize gaming as a site of public desire—the $3b video game industry had transformed into $100m niche market within the span of less than a year (Sheff, 1993/1999).

The interests of global capital would continue to have an effect on the development of digital play when, in the effort to resurrect the financial prospects of the U.S. Video Game
industry, Nintendo implemented the 10NES lockout chip with the release of the NES as a means of artificially inducing scarcity—the chip made it nearly impossible for unauthorized software manufactures to develop games for Nintendo’s platform (Sheff, 1993/1999). The industry crash and decline of Atari and subsequent rise of Nintendo, then, points to a shift in the political economic and cultural configuration of digital play: one that could account for the financial interests of third-party developers, consumer demand for quality games regardless of manufacturer, and the economic interests of hardware makers. Nintendo’s hardware design, however, effectively enforced its political economic interests; for though Nintendo’s technological and economic system did proceed to restore consumer faith in the industry, the concentration of power introduced as a result—the 10NES chip meant that game manufactures had to rely upon Nintendo to both approve of the game’s content and manufacture the game cartridge (Sheff, 1993/1999)—had a significant impact on the direction of gaming practices. Nintendo, for instance, would leverage its control over software production in the United States so as to ensure that games developed for the U.S. market would resonate with the company’s brand image as a toy, thus meaning that certain themes, such as religion, would be off-limit topics for U.S. game designers (Herz, 1997; Kent, 2001; Sheff, 1993/1999). To the extent that first Atari and then Nintendo’s political economic interests and technology served as the dominant platform for the expression of digital play for their respective generations, then, how can the sequence of events described above not be considered an essential part of the regime of truth we call gaming?

Moreover, as the previous chapter suggested (See “Introduction”), not only are the interests of global capital and those of the U.S. military (and others perhaps) bound up in the practices of contemporary gaming, but so too are those of non-governmental organizations as
well. The growing presence of the indie gaming movement, typically understood as anti-industry and thus necessarily anti-Empire (See Games for Change, 2011), that has captured the attention of most research regarding non-governmental gaming production, however, has unfortunately, created a false dichotomy between the interest of global capital and the military and that of other sources of gaming production. Operating in the context of Empire, however, the interests involved in the production and consumption of gaming, regardless of their site of origin, cannot be separated so cleanly. As Heidegger (1954/1977a) notes, we must be able to distinguish the purpose of technology from the producer of technology:

> There is a fourth participate in the responsibility for the finished sacrificial vessel’s lying before us ready for use, i.e., The silversmith—but not at all because he, in working, brings about the finished sacrificial chalice as if it were the effect of a making; the silversmith is not a causa efficiens [e.g., that which puts a thing in motion].

> The silversmith considers carefully and gathers together the three aforementioned ways of being responsible and indebted [e.g., the material, form, and purpose]. To consider carefully is in Greek legein, logos. Legein is rooted in apophainesthai, to bring forward into appearance. […] The three previously mentioned ways of being responsible owe thanks to the pondering the silversmith. (8)

In other words, the producer behind a particular manifestation of technology operates as such not necessarily because of some fantastic power emanating from her subjectivity (e.g., the great mind or auteur theory of production), but rather because she has the capacity, by virtue of her social position, to tap into the motives invested in the other practices of technology: e.g., the interplay between circuits of production and consumption (material), form, and desire (purpose).

For instance, the desire to remember the Holocaust and those who sacrificed their lives in the process of bringing about the end of the reign of Nazi Germany may be commendable; however, the interest, as portrayed in the works of Steven Spielberg—the director of not only Schindler’s List (1993) and Saving Private Ryan (1998), but also the video game, Medal of Honor (Electronic Arts, 1999b)—links up nicely with the problematic that is the remembrance of World War II as the Good War (See “Chapter Four”). This problematic, this particular practice
of memory, has obscured the initial complacency in which Western Europe and the United States reacted towards the Holocaust (Ostrow, 2005; Zelizer, 1998) and the troubling racial practices that were in operation within the west during the same period, such as that of Japanese Internment. Hence, though the Medal of Honor video game series (Electronic Arts, 1999b, 2002a, 2002b, 2003b, 2007, 2010c), may have originated as a pet project of Spielberg’s, outside of the explicit desires of finance capital and the military (Edge, 2011b), the franchise has linked up nicely with the imperial interests of both: military history games are amongst the most profitable genre in the industry and frequently portray military events unproblematically, in terms of the everyday good guy versus the absolutely evil bad guy (Hess, 2007).

This is not to suggest that anti-imperial gaming interests cannot exist—surely they do (See Games for Change, 2011). Rather it is to suggest that the interplay between Empire and anti-imperialist interests are more complex than they may be typically granted (Hardt & Negri, 2001); it is not imperial interests versus anti-imperial subjects (or vice-versa), but rather that of a complex interplay between the two that at times makes for strange bedfellows (Hardt & Negri, 2001; Thomas, 2011). Moreover, to the extent that purpose is typically understood in terms of individual agency or collective volition (e.g., policy), at the expense of that which is embedded within technology, then one remains ignorant of the political interests in operation within the technology itself. As Alexander Galloway (2006) has argued, if one were to intervene upon the purpose of gaming only at the level of ideology—deployed as content—than the politics of a fetish of algorithmic control would still remain untouched, and to this we could add the politics of material procurement and distribution itself. It would seem, then, that though multiple sites of occasioning exist for challenging the political economic and cultural structure of digital play—from the materials used to the contents desired and institutional practices deployed—one must
remember to keep the totality of digital play always within sight. Failing to do so means that one risks reproducing the structures of domination in that of another, unobserved, domain of digital play; advocating for diversity amongst the ranks of content producers, as important as this may be, for instance, does not necessarily address the material effect digital play has on the global ecology—in terms of energy used, resources procured, and e-waste produced. Hence, it seems appropriate to now step back and give a rough account for the totality of contemporary digital play.

*The Reality of Play*

The technological real operates as a special mode of production in that it not only serves as the foundation upon which other forms of technology develop (e.g., the telephone needed something like the telegraph), but that it also serves as a site of veridiction for judging the plausibility of all subsequent technological development, whether actual or otherwise (e.g., mobile, “smart” phones can play games, but are they gaming devices?). Heidegger’s (1938/1977) discussion in “The Age of the World Picture” elaborates more clearly upon this, in that he argues that the possibility and actualization of photography helped to crystallize a particular ontological reality of “calculating, planning, and molding all things” (p. 135). In other words, much like Walter Benjamin’s (1935/2006) fascination at experiencing the ability for the motion picture to reveal “entirely new structural formations of the subject” (p. 31), so too do technologists (and those who experience technology) see a new regime of truth emerging from out of the technologies they have created (Miles, 2011; Weisberg, 2010).

Yet, whereas Benjamin remained committed to a poetics of movement, in a word caught up by what Heidegger (1950/1977) calls the “in-flashing […] disclosing coming-to-pass within Being itself” (p. 44) that represents the possibility of turning technology towards other ends (e.g.,
increased social and political consciousness), the excitement of many technologists, to the extent that technology itself is offered up as a solution to the social and political, up against that of the cultural (e.g., technology versus culture, as opposed to the technological is cultural), is directed towards that of the possibility of transforming a society into standing-reserve (Heidegger, 1954/1977b). To perhaps put it more clearly, when technology is offered as the solution or logic upon which the social behavior should and is expected to conform, then unique populations are transformed into the unique inputs necessary for the technological machine to function; in the words of Jacques Ellul (1954/1964):

Technique [...] surpasses and transcends the machine because it remains in close touch with the human order.
[…]
Technique integrates the machine into society. It constructs the kind of world the machine needs and introduces order [...]. It clarifies, arranges, and rationalizes [...].
[…]
Technique integrates everything. [...] Man [sic] is not adapted to a world of steel; technique adapts him to it. [...] Technique thus provides a model; it specifies attitudes that are valid once and for all.
[…]
When technique enters into every area of life, including the human, it ceases to be external to man and becomes his very substance. (pp. 5-6)

And yet, Heidegger (1954/1977a) always held out hope that embedded within the four practices of technology was the chance for an opportunity to intervene upon the direction of technological development—though to do so one must first understand the danger posed by technology. Hence, for the sake of our purposes, that is to glean the possibilities of turning video games away from Empire and towards that of a more equitable global politics, it may be useful to give a brief account of the current state of play, based upon a synthesis of several of the key concepts discussed above: namely, the material, form, purpose, and producers of gaming today.

The current regime of digital play is dominated by three hardware manufacturers across multiple, use-specific platforms. Two of the hardware manufacturers, Nintendo and Sony, have dedicated their energies towards the practices surrounding dedicated-use home and mobile
consoles: the PlayStation 3 (PS3) and PlayStation Portable (PSP), and now PlayStation Vita, for Sony, and the Wii and 3DS for Nintendo. The other major hardware manufacturer, Microsoft, has roughly split its energy between the home console (Xbox 360) and personal computer markets; though Microsoft does not directly profit from the sale of PC games, the development of DirectX, a collection of game development friendly application programming interfaces, was meant to answer the question of whether Windows could become “a gaming platform that could compete with Sega and Nintendo?” (Eisler, 2006)—and to the extent that DirectX succeeded in answering this question, then Windows, and by extension Microsoft, could function at the center of a given home’s information and entertainment needs. Indeed, it is believed that Microsoft only entered the home console market because “they were concerned that the Sony PlayStation was going to usurp […] the PC’s rightful place as the home hub, the gateway to the outside world” (Matt Rosoff, qtd in The Economist, 2005; See also Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

Though three major hardware manufacturers may control platform production, the similarities of the three are more striking than their differences. In terms of material procurement, all three manufacturers are involved in an exploitive circuit of production, consumption, and disposal. Though Sony received the bulk of the criticism surrounding the use of tantalum—an important element used in the manufacture of electronics equipment and whose demand is believed to have played a role in the war between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda—all major electronics manufacturers are implicated to some extent; and if Sony received criticism by virtue of its status as the most popular gaming company in the early 2000s, then the popularity of Nintendo (and to a lesser extent, Microsoft) has led the demand today. Likewise, all three home consoles (and PCs, if we choose to include them) utilize a considerable amount of energy under conventional use, especially if we include the various
apparatuses, such as high-definition television sets, that have become part and parcel with contemporary gaming practices (Hittinger, 2011). Indeed, Greenpeace has consistently ranked video game console manufacturers poorly in its annual “Hi-Tech Company Report Card,” with Microsoft and Nintendo ranked last (17th and 18th respectively), and Sony in a three-way tie for 6th, with a score of 5.1 out of 10 (Greenpeace, 2010). As Nintendo begins the shift towards high-definition gaming, it is conceivable that not only will its Greenpeace ranking remain unchanged, but that the industry as a whole will continue to be part of a larger, global trend towards ever greater energy consumption.

Beyond the three major hardware manufacturers, the industry as a whole is dominated by men and patriarchal values. The video game industry has long functioned as a gentlemen’s club, with female employees typically confined to marketing and public relations responsibilities (Haines, 2004; Stone, 1995/1998); in 2004, women comprised only 17% of the industry workforce, with “an enormous 73% of women working […] outside the main jobs of creating the games” (Haines, 2004). Considering that the overall number of women working in the industry had only risen from 16% in 2002 to 17% in 2004 (Haines, 2004), it is difficult to imagine that the numbers have shifted significantly. Though it is difficult to obtain numbers regarding the racial demographics of those employed in the industry, interviews with those in the industry suggest that African-Americans and perhaps other non-White populations are underrepresented in the industry (John, 2008a, 2008b). My experience at the 2011 Electronic Entertainment Expo resonates with these interviews, and suggests that the industry is still very much dominated by White and Japanese men, with increasing numbers of Asian Americans; the vast majority of women, regardless of ethnicity, however, appeared to be employed as promotions staff (e.g., “booth babes”). Moreover, the high turnover rate, low pay, and subsequent expendability of
game testers, suggest that the knowledge economy of video game content is built upon the backs of the knowledge economy of working class populations. That said, the higher pay associated with working on the game development side of the industry (e.g., programming), is increasingly becoming one of the few (though important) things that distinguishes the work experiences of the middle class knowledge worker from the lower class game tester (See: Bonds, et al., 2004; EA Spouse, 2004; McMillen, 2011). In spite of this convergence, however, higher pay is a legitimate difference, and to the extent that economic mobility is increasingly tied to participation within the knowledge economy proper (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999; Entertainment Software Association, 2010)—and not its material substructure—then vast populations have already been relegated to the economic margins of contemporary Empire.

This is more than just a political economic critique of the employment conditions and demographics of the industry, as valuable as that critique is, as it also speaks to the interests and desires addressed through the practices of gaming. Dominated as it is by men, it is not surprising that the industry caters to the interests and desires of masculine audiences (Haines, 2004). Intersecting these interests as well is that of racial and sexual anxiety. After the first trailer for the game Resident Evil 5 (2009) appeared in mid-2007, prominent game journalist N’Gai Croal commented, “Wow, clearly no one black worked on this game” (qtd. in John, 2008c). Similar comments have been made about other contemporary games; for instance, speaking of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas (Rockstar Games, 2004), Morgan Gray, a video game developer commented:

so far [‘San Andreas’] is the only ‘Grand Theft Auto’ that I didn’t beat because if I have to hear one more ‘nigger’ drop out of someone’s mouth knowing it was penned by a bunch of white cats—I’m like I’m done here. I can’t play this; I’m feeling so filthy. […] I’m not saying it’s a bad game; I’m saying without the proper tools to understand what’s really going on there, it’s just too risky at what people’s takeaway will be. (qtd. in John, 2008b)
Bound within these concerns is that of the anxiety and desire embedded within the content of these games. It is not just that African Americans were not heavily involved in the creative processes of game design—though people of African descent were hired as voice and motion capture performers—but rather that two seemingly different games, in terms of genre, gameplay, and narrative, made by two seemingly different populations, Edinburgh, Scotland (Grand Theft Auto) and Osaka, Japan (Resident Evil 5), could both present racially problematic games, and then defend those actions under the guise of authenticity. This is not to suggest that either a game is inauthentic or authentic, but rather that the regime of truth upon which to validate the authenticity of each game is that of Empire. In other words, the meticulous geographic mapping of actual urban spaces and the use of historically appropriate music and other cultural iconography, in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, works to evacuate history from processes of racialization—race is space and the ghetto is the truth of African American identity.

Likewise, a similar evacuation of history occurs in Resident Evil 5. Resident Evil 5, like Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, makes use of history only insofar as to situate the spatial contexts of the game. Here, a history of medical and political anxiety surrounding Africa is deployed so as to fix the continent as a site of perpetual disease and despair—space is culture, and the wild of Africa is the truth of its people (See “Chapter Five”). Even the content of games is a site of imperial anxiety and desire.

This is the current state of play. Practices of gaming require ever more frequent technological linkages, as it is no longer enough to merely own a television and video game console to constitute a site of legitimate gaming practices; one must now own a large, high-definition television set, have access to high-speed, broadband Internet, and (optionally) possess surround sound speakers, not to mention the increasing glut of peripheries (e.g., Wii Balance
Board, PlayStation Move controllers). Gaming content, though having expanded to include non-traditional audiences, remains heavily geared towards fulfilling the desires of White, heterosexual, masculinity. This is not to suggest that the desires of others are not being fulfilled, but rather that these desires are often only fulfilled to the extent that they converge with the interests and anxieties of White, heterosexual, masculinity. And though working within the industry is not as laissez-faire as once thought to be, employment within the industry (especially on its knowledge economy side) remains lucrative and desirable; and yet, the possibility of fulfilling this desire remains limited, especially for those coming from racialized and gendered backgrounds. This is the current state of play, and it is here we find the foundations for the production of a hardcore subjectivity.

**From Hardcore Technologies to Hardcore Subjectivities**

If it is true that technology aims to construct “the kind of world the machine needs” (Ellul, 1954/1964, p. 5)—and to be clear, by technology, I mean that set of practices and modes of occasioning that are invested in the production and consumption of the machine we call technology (in this case, the video game machine)—then what kind of world is being sought after by the technology we call the video game? First, it should be clear that I believe standing behind the apparatus we call video gaming is an array of interests, including various publics, corporate, military, state, and non-governmental desires. These interests manifest at various stages, to varying effects and consequences, in the circuit of production and consumption. The organizing principle of these desires, and anxieties, I believe, however, is that of Empire. This is a global phenomenon driven by a breakdown in the integrity of the nation-state as an organizing principle and the subsequent rise in transnational capital as a governmental logic (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Hardt & Negri, 2001). This is not to suggest that nation-states, or
that the state-form more generally (in terms of supranational political bodies, such as the United Nations), no longer have a role in global politics, but rather that the positioning of capital as that which serves as the common bond between various populations thus serves as a site for political action that operates in excess of the interests and desires of the state-form. In other words, the economic (as opposed to the political) field has come to be conceived as the natural and legitimate site for the petitioning of interests (Foucault, 1978-1979/2008). And yet, we know, however, that the economic is not a natural field, but rather one that must be called upon, given form, and guaranteed with the backing of explicit political interests (Foucault, 1978-1979/2008), such as that of the legal recognition of private property which is demanded by and gives form to contemporary economic liberalism. As such, though the “world market both homogenizes and differentiates territories, rewriting the geography of the globe,” nation-states function as “filters of the flow of global circulation and regulators of the articulation of global capital” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 310). To clarify my initial claim, then, if it is true that gaming constructs the kind of world that Empire needs, then what kind of world is being constructed by the practices of digital play?

Though this question is one that will be undertaken and put to test over the course of this dissertation, it seems as though exploring the production of a new subjectivity that is capable of carrying out and desiring the needs of imperial play is a necessary beginning. This desire is embedded, I believe, within the video game player in accordance with the five modes of technological engagement discussed above (material, form, purpose, producer, and the technological real). The particular configuration of this application, however, can be synthesized in terms of two distinct but overlapping fields of desire: material consumption and the political imaginary. The first concept, material consumption, means that access to the realm of the
political imaginary is contingent upon a certain threshold of material consumption. This does not mean that material production and consumption necessarily determines the form of the political imaginary realized within gaming practices, but rather that certain material prerequisites are required to even the access that political imaginary. For instance, though gaming is talked about as if it operates in the immaterial realm (as immaterial labor or virtual play), the production and consumption of gaming practices involves a transnational circuit of material procurement, embodied laboring practices, and environmental consequences, in terms of energy usage and waste disposal. This transnational circuit is expanded by orders of magnitude as we include the additional technologies that have transitioned from being supplemental gaming practices to that of essential gaming practices. These are technologies such as high-definition television displays, high-speed, broadband Internet, digital distribution models, add-on content, subscription based pay-to-play services (or advertising supported services), et cetera. In essence, though the gaming industry may have tracked $25.1b in consumer spending, in terms of hardware, accessories, and game content purchased within the United States for the year 2010 (Entertainment Software Association, 2011a), this economic footprint expands significantly once we consider that gaming practices have influenced the production and consumption of other media technologies and contents; moreover, though the Entertainment Software Association, as a U.S.-based association, only tracks sales, demographic, and usage data within the United States, gaming practices bleed across national borders. Put simply, engagement in contemporary digital play within the United States may consist of, for example: playing on a console designed by Japan-based Nintendo, with components from Canada-based ATI, U.S.-based IBM, and others, that was assembled in China, with materials procured from across the globe; connected to a television designed by a Korean-based manufacturer (e.g., Samsung or LG), with its own circuit of production and consumption;
while using a broadband Internet connection (provided by AT&T) to play with a stranger in France; and, we have not even mentioned the game being played!

This global network of production and consumption, is one in which the video game player not only participates, but adamantly desires. Gamers have come to expect and demand that contemporary video game consoles will link seamlessly with the other global circuits of production and consumption. Indeed, as noted earlier in this chapter, the dramatic decline in Nintendo’s 2011 economic forecast (which dropped by 80%) speaks explicitly to this gaming desire; though the Nintendo Wii significantly expanded the notion of what constituted a gaming public, through the implementation of unconventional gameplay elements (e.g., motion control), the company failed to integrate a global circuit of production and consumption to the same extent as its competitors. In other words, as impressive as the circuit described above in the previous paragraph may be—with its four layers of production and consumption—it pales in comparison to the linkages offered by other gaming practices. Nintendo has not been able to move beyond the construction of gaming as an entertainment supersystem, with its corresponding subject, the fanboy. The subjectivity of a fanboy, however, is one that is only capable of sustaining the logics of an entertainment supersystem—that is to fanatically consume and reproduce a narrow commodity across a broad spectrum of entertainment practices.

Today, however, the subjectivity of the fanboy has given way to that of a hardcore subject. That is because, though Nintendo continues to produce fanboys, those same individuals must operate within a hardcore world, in which gaming practices are no longer confined to gaming, as conventionally understood, itself. What this has meant is that fanboys continue to be produced, but since Nintendo fanboys are notorious for purchasing almost exclusively Nintendo products (e.g., consuming a narrow commodity), the production of the fanboy
inadvertently removes Nintendo from a very important circuit of production and consumption for contemporary gaming practices: third-party support (See: Matthews, 2008; Muskus, 2008). Moreover, since third-party, multi-console games typically look and play better on other modern gaming consoles (e.g., the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3), due to more advanced graphics processors and internal storage space and memory, Fanboys are encouraged to satisfy their gaming desires by owning multiple consoles: the Wii for their fanboy needs and another system for their hardcore needs. For instance, why buy Call of Duty: Black Ops (Activision, 2010a) for the Wii, when the game was obviously optimized for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, as the game emphasizes online play, downloadable content, and high-definition graphics capabilities—all networks of production and consumption limited or lacking on the Wii. And indeed, Call of Duty: Black Ops sold significantly better on these two other systems: 12.89m (Xbox 360), 10.48m (PS3), and 1.03m (Wii) respectively (VGChartz, 2011). Here, we witness evidence of a desire for a global network of production and consumption manifest.

The desire to access a global network of production and consumption speaks to the political realities of which the gamer is a part. One does not play for the sake of consumption, but rather one plays because play offers a means for making sense of (or escaping) the political realities of today. This desire is reflected in the content of those games that have come to serve as the most popular sites of play today: Call of Duty, a military-themed game, became the bestselling third-party console and PC franchise of all time in 2010, despite having only existed since 2003 (Activision-Blizzard, 2010); The Sims, a lifestyle simulator, is the bestselling PC franchise of all time, despite having first appeared in 2000 (Electronic Arts, 2010e); and, Resident Evil, a dystopian near-future, survivor horror game, which is not only an extremely popular franchise in its own right (Capcom, 2011b), but has also spawned the most popular video
game-themed movie franchise, as well as a series of comic books and novels. Though other popular video game genres do exist, and are worthy of analysis, it is striking that the genres represented above, the first-person shooter, simulation or resource management, and survivor horror, have dominated the industry since the turn of the century. These are not pure categories, as some games, such as *Dead Space* (Electronic Arts, 2008b) and *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007), blend elements of multiple genres (e.g., the first-person shooter and survivor horror); but the point remains that the themes of war, resource management (economics), and dystopia have come to be increasingly popular topics in the last two decades.

These genres are legitimate sites of desire and anxiety. To various extents and effects, vast publics live in a constant state of military, economic, and environmental anxiety and desire. If the millennium did not bring us the “Y2K bug,” as feared, it did not, however, fail to deliver upon the anxiety and desire embedded within that selfsame metaphor of the bug: that of a global order about to emerge from chrysalis. From the Gulf War of 1991 to September 11th 2001, global hegemony was undergoing a state of rapid metamorphosis, such as that marked by the establishment of the World Trade Organization and the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the end result being that of Empire—with the United States at its head (Hardt & Negri, 2001). What the new millennium brought, hence, was not something altogether new, but rather the full effect of a particular crystallization of global politics. This has meant: a prolonged state of global conflict, that of the war on terror, with no foreseeable end in sight; transnational economic links so powerful that financial uncertainty in one corner of the globe can destabilize whole regions in other parts of the globe; and, seemingly annual outbreaks of, or fear of, global epidemics, not to mention the seemingly unstoppable threat of global warming. As Paul Virilio (2004/2005) has argued, the global reach of the new millennium has resulted in a world “that is closed,
foreclosed, in which we [are all under threat of being] outsourced, in other words, excluded” (p. 109). This is the political imaginary of which gaming engages: the fear of not being included in war (as victor), the economy (as entrepreneur), and life as we know it (as survivor). This is the complex web of anxiety and desire of which the production and consumption of play is a part; both because these practices are embedded within the circuits of production and consumption of gaming (e.g., the mines of the DRC [See Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009]) and because play itself becomes a site of legitimation, privileging certain anxieties and desires above the others.

This then is the subjectivity that is the hardcore gamer: (1) one who’s production and consumption reproduces the economic circuits of Empire; and, (2) one who’s political imaginary converges with, and thus reproduces, the political anxieties and desires of Empire. Though not all gamers are necessarily hardcore gamers, to the extent that hardcore subjectivities drive the production and consumption of video game technologies and contents (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Haines, 2004), then we increasingly live in a hardcore world—that is, the world of imperial play. The politics of this imperial play is such that the fantasy of being an imperial subject is seen as desirable, even if the actuality of being such a subject is often not so desirable.

If in 2001, Lev Manovich expressed concern that work and leisure “not only […] increasingly involved computer use, but […] also converge around the same interfaces” (p. 77), today we are witnessing something quite different: today work and leisure frequently involve the same subject matter, or fantasy thereof. Simulations of work, warfare, and epidemic function as the model by which we measure actuality; when a game is deemed realistic, it is only because we have mistaken the mental mapping of another’s anxiety or desire for that of our own (Manovich, 2001). When we deem a game to be realistic, we must be careful that we have not mistaken the desires and anxieties of Empire for our own.
But I Do Not Play That Way

Play is not personal. Though we may have our own unique reasons for engaging with play, the experience of play is intertwined with the practices of which make it possible to say that one is playing. Today, when one says she or he plays video games, behind the statement are the often unacknowledged circuits of production and consumption upon which digital play is made possible. Today, when one says she or he finds a game compelling, behind the statement is the often unacknowledged suspicion that such a game may not be a game at all, but rather fragments of an actuality. Today, when one says she or he does not play that way, the belief is that her or his gaming practices have not necessarily aligned with the dominant regime of imperial play, in terms of the: material, form, purpose, and/or producer. These beliefs are not necessarily incorrect. One may play games only developed by independent game designers, so as to somewhat mitigate the circuits of production and consumption of video gaming, at least on the knowledge economy side—as a physical console or computer is still needed to play. One may play games only with others physically present, so that the form of play is grounded within community values. One may play games only dealing with “innocent” subject matter, such as Cooking Mama (Taito, 2006), so as to avoid the more troubling politics of play. And, one may play games only developed by companies with a strong commitment to workplace diversity, so as to promote the development of more diverse gaming content. These are all viable gaming options that run up against the dominant logic of imperial play.

And yet, one does not need to play that way to still satisfy the desires of Empire. The console assembly workers in Guadalajara, Mexico, still work under harsh conditions, and will still see their factory close in favor of cheaper labor markets (See Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), regardless of how one plays the pro-Empire content of the Call of Duty series (Activision,
2003b, 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2008a, 2009a, 2010a), or even the anti-Empire content of the *Metal Gear Solid* series (Konami, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2008). Why are we led to believe that satisfying a given populations’ desire “to play shooter games one way or another” with “homegrown alternatives allowing [these] youths to play from their own [culture’s] perspective [and] not as surrogate Americans,” would fundamentally reconfigure the logics of the game play algorithm (Galloway, 2006, p. 82), as opposed to just the parameters of play; this is not to suggest that parameters are unimportant, but rather that if the fundamental logic of contemporary play is that of the algorithm, and mastery of the game requires that one submit to the logic of another (Crogan, 2003; Manovich, 2001), then how can merely flipping the parameters of play (e.g., the enemy is now them, rather than us) transform the ideological desires of the game, when even if the parameters are different, the flipping itself remains the same? In other words, if the fundamental logic of the first person shooter is to “fight, resist and destroy your enemy,” precisely how does it matter whether the enemy is Hezbollah, the National Alliance (a white separatist group), the U.S. Military, or Electronic Arts that is the one encouraging us to do so (See: R. Armstrong, 2005; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Edge, 2011b; Harnden, 2004; Wiltenburg, 2003)? My point is not to suggest that Hezbollah, Activision, the U.S. Military, or the National Alliance are equally illegitimate or legitimate organizations, but rather that when each of these four (and there are definitely more) unique and very different populations each find a particular video game form to be a suitable site for recruitment of future military personnel, then we must ask: is it the genre that is flexible enough to satisfy the anxieties and desires of such different groups? Or is it that the groups are each flexible enough to conform their anxieties and desires to the logics of the genre? In this case, the logic of war: enemies are always already enemies; the heroes are unquestionably heroic; and, violence is the only realistic option.
Though legitimate (and illegitimate) desires and anxieties are addressed via contemporary gaming practices, if we are truly to commit to not playing that way, and undermining the logic of Empire, then we must attempt to grasp the totality of gaming as a global practice. Addressing individual strands of gaming—as in focusing solely on the material, form, purpose, or producers of play—has proved to be a worthwhile practice throughout the history of game studies, insofar as it is useful to know how representation functions in video games or that various communities can redeploy the same genre so as to serve their particular needs. And yet, failing to grasp, or at least attempting to grasp, the totality of play, is to risk not recognizing what Nancy Fraser (2009) has termed, critical theory’s “‘dangerous liaison’ with neoliberalism” (p. 114). Or to restate this for our interests here, failing to recognize the totality that is play means that we risk celebrating gaming practices without understanding the various substructures embedded throughout. In the chapters that follow, dedicated to the popular gaming themes of warfare, resource management, and dystopia, I attempt to grasp as best as possible the totality of that which is gaming: (1) so as to recognize the dangerous liaisons that exist between digital play and Empire; and, (2) to learn how we might better exploit those moments of not playing that way.

Notes:

xiii Patrick Crogan’s recently released “Gameplay Mode: War, Simulation, and Technoculture” (2011) serves as an important exception, however. That said, I am confident that Crogan would agree that the field of game studies in general has shown an aversion to considering digital play as an important engine of contemporary global capital. So though the logistics of writing have prevented me from thoroughly engaging this recent work, I am pleased to see that others, perhaps more capable than I, am looking towards such questions.

xiv To be fair, Aaron Hess would probably not define himself as a technological determinist, but rather a rhetorician. However, to the extent that his analysis of Medal of Honor: Rising Sun leaves aside the question of technology, his position ultimately results in the same conclusion as that of the penultimate technological determinist, Neal Postman; Hess writes, “Since fully representing war is impossible [in video games], the limited participation of Rising Sun gamers leads to a critical blindness regarding modern warfare” (p. 352).

xv By totality, I do not mean that the task of the critic is to reproduce the geopolitical and historical record of a given domain in its absolute—that is, reproduce a map the size of the territory—as I do not believe this is even possible, or useful. Rather, I mean that we must seek to understand how our domain operates as a complex whole in conjunction and tension with other contemporary and historical political projects.

xvi Consumption itself is a form of waste production. In the video game industry, this is evidenced by the fact that with every new iteration of a video game console, prior software is rendered obsolete in that new consoles can rarely
read the code of previous hardware. And though backwards compatibility has emerged as a counterpoint to this claim, this mechanism does not stifle the production of waste, but actively reproduces it: for instance, the shift to digital distribution as a means of backwards compatibility (e.g., God of War Collections [Sony Computer Entertainment, 2009]) effectively destabilizes the collectors industry, thus removing an important site in the recycling of old game hardware and software—that is, with digital distribution, less people will be inclined to hold on to old gaming platforms because new gaming platforms contain the perceptual experience of the old one. Moreover, to the extent that digital play is increasingly tied to accounts, it is foreseeable that the circulation, and hence ownership, of older consoles will be actively discouraged in that software may be locked to given system/account so as to deter presumed piracy; thus, effectively reducing prior systems to what is known within the gaming community as a “brick”—that is, a useless, non-functioning, piece of technology.

Some may object, and protest that those studying the consumption side of gaming (e.g., psychoanalysis, media effects, and audience studies) are in actuality concerned with locating the effects of technology. True as this may be, however, those studying the effects of the consumption of video games frequently abstract the ends of technology from the ends of society itself. In other words, if searching for the consequence of technology can be properly thought of as searching for the telos of a technology, then one is in actuality looking for “that which in advance” gives boundaries to the production and consumption of the thing (Heidegger, 1954/1977a, p. 8); psychoanalysis, media effects, and audience studies are not often interested in understanding “that which in advance confines” the intention of a given technology, but rather take as their starting point the formal attributes of technology as a given—and then, subsequently, how is it that this form is consumed. Hence, rather than being concerned with understanding the causa efficiens of technology, that which “is responsible for what has matter and for what as [form] are together co-responsible for” (Heidegger, 1954/1977a), studies of consumption often ignore the interests that stand behind the construction of a given technology, and instead take technology to be an effect without cause.

Steven Jones offers this to the observation in relation to the practices of ludologists in contrast to that of other approaches to video game studies, such as narratologists and cultural studies inspired modes of analysis. To the extent, however, that many narrative and cultural approaches to the understanding of video games focus on the game content itself, at the expense of “authorial, historical, or cultural factors,” then these studies are as confined to the formal characteristics of the video game as ludologists—but in terms of literary formalism as opposed to gameplay formalism (See: Hess, 2007; Murray, 1997).

Though to be clear, movement for some operates on the outer limits of choice—thereby suggesting that so too is stasis, sometimes, a sign of privilege.

It is a wonder as to why Henry Jenkins demonstrates particular nuance regarding the play of pleasure and control in this earlier writing on the form of new media, explicitly gaming, whereas in his later, Convergence Culture (2006), pleasure is placed on the side of play and control is conceived as something that can be and is to be overcome—thus celebrating new media as antithetical to control, thereby obscuring the nuance of his earlier theory.

Algorithms obviously are more than just the steps needed to excel within a game, but for the concerns of the player, the algorithm of the game is that which must be learned so as to excel in the game (Crogan, 2003).

As an analytic, however, it still can be useful to set technology (understood in the conventional sense) apart so as to understand the politics invested within the machine itself, for politics often operates “under the cover of technical necessity” (Starr, 2004, p. 6).

To a lesser extent this critique could be levied chords that of Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (Rockstar Games, 2002) and other games in the Grand Theft Auto series; the difference, perhaps, is that the characters starring in the other games can all to some extent lay claim to Whiteness. The problem then, is that these other characters function as warnings against ethnic identification amongst White peoples. Whiteness, conceived as a utopian space, is necessarily a non-space, protected us such by the lack of ethnic identification. The trouble then, is that Tommy Vercetti (Vice City) and Niko Bellic (Grand Theft Auto IV [Rockstar Games, 2008]) identify as Italian and Eastern European, respectively, as opposed to white; whereas such an option is never available, more even possible, for CJ (GTA: San Andreas [Rockstar Games, 2004]).

Here, I am speaking exclusively of end-user gaming practices (i.e., using a game machine to play games versus using a game machine to connect to the internet or watch a movie).

Nancy Fraser is speaking specifically of feminist theory in this article, however, while speaking at the University of Illinois in 2011, she elaborated that her target was critical theory more generally (See: Bulut, 2011; Kwon, 2011).
CHAPTER THREE

THE ECONOMICS OF PLAY: LOGISTICS OF ANXIETY AND DESIRE

David Harvey (2007) has written that “future historians may well look upon the years 1978-1980 as a revolutionary turning-point in the world’s social and economic history” (p. 1). Those who do will be unable to avoid the role new information and communication technologies have played within this political economic revolution. If old communication technologies, such as the telegraph and train, brought about the standardization of time via time-zones and promises of sustaining the integrity of nation-states and colonial empires (Carey, 1975/2009, 1983/2009), then new communication technologies, such as the internet and mobile telephony, have sought to undermine notions of time and space itself. Whereas old communication technologies sought to regulate time (e.g., I cannot work when I am asleep), new communication technologies seek to penetrate time (e.g., I continue to work through automation even when I am asleep). Again, David Harvey (1990) is instructive: “Financial services and markets (aided by computerized trading) likewise speeded up, so as to make, as the saying has it, ‘twenty-four hours a very long time’ in global stock markets” (p. 285).

And yet, the key to understanding the effects and consequences of the political economic revolution brought about during the years 1978-1980 cannot be understood only in terms of the compression of time and space, that is transmission. For as John Dewey (1916/1955) noted, society exists not only “by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication” (p. 5). To the extent that this is true, then our accounts of the effects and consequences of new communication technologies cannot be solely occupied with the accelerating compression of time and space (e.g., transmission), as important as this may be, but must also take care to note the transforming social relations brought about by a society
increasingly operating in accordance to the logic of these new communication technologies, that is an attention to the rituals associated with these new ICTs. The production and consumption of a particular communications regime speaks to the anxieties and desires of a given time and place (R. Williams, 1974/2005). To understand the role new ICTs have had in the configuration of contemporary national and transnational culture and economies, then, it seems pertinent to understand how this technological regime was articulated in relationship to existent social anxieties and desires. A key site for understanding the historical and ongoing articulation of this relationship, I argue, is to be found within the history of the video game industry.

The ubiquity of new information and communication technologies, however, can obscure the role the video game has played and continues to play in the development and ongoing ecosystem of new ICTs. Though the concept of contemporary ICTs had existed theoretically since Charles Babbage’s Analytical Engine (in 1832), and would come to function as a reality as early as 1940 with the creation of the ABC and Ultra electronic computers (Kurzweil, 1999), the general public’s first encounter with new ICTs would come in the form of the video game. As Tim Wu (2010) has written, it was not until 1977, with the introduction of the Apple II, that “personal computing, an obscure pursuit of the hobbyist, [became] a nationwide phenomenon” (p. 275); only two years prior, in 1975, the sales of personal computers had just exceeded 5,000 units (Kurzweil, 1999). In contrast, the first video game console available to consumers, the Magnavox Odyssey, sold between 85,000 to 100,000 units in 1972, the year it was released (Herz, 1997; Kent, 2001); this is in addition to the arcade market, of which Pong, the first arcade success, had an installation base of 100,000 units by 1974 (Montfort & Bogost, 2009), and was so popular at its first location, Andy Capp’s Tavern, that two-weeks after being installed, the machine jammed due to being overloaded with coins (Kent, 2001).xxvi For the vast majority of
the public in the 1970s, video games were their first encounter with new media technologies; and this continues be true to this day, with the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life project (2012) reporting that, in 2009, more teenagers had access to a gaming device than they did a cell phone, computer, or even MP3 player (See Figure 3.1; See also Lenhart, 2009).

Though the early and ongoing popularity of the video game can be at least partially explained in terms of relative cost for households with more limited (though still substantial) disposable incomes, this statement alone is not enough if we are to understand the political

![Teen gadget ownership](image)

**Figure 3.1. Teen Gadget Ownership.**
economic significance of the video games popularity. To begin, some numbers are in order. As noted above, the personal computer was still a very rare and expensive technology in the mid-1970s. The first popular, widely adopted personal computer, the Apple II cost $1,298, upon its release in 1977 (Montfort & Bogost, 2009). After accounting for inflation, this is the equivalent of $4,859 in terms of purchasing power today (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). In contrast, the Atari 2600, released the same year, sold at $199 (Montfort & Bogost, 2009), or $745 in today’s terms (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011). Economic barriers to arcade machines were, and continue to be, even lower, costing the consumer mere quarters to play—though this can quickly add up through multiple play attempts. This cost differential between full-featured computers and dedicated gaming consoles clearly illustrates the financial barriers that made purchasing a

Figure 3.2. The ICT Public (1970-1976). Sources include Friedman (2005), Herz (1997), and Kent (2005).
personal computer economically unfeasible for the vast majority of the public (See Figures 3.2-3). It does not explain, however, why these economic barriers existed in the first instance. Differences in technological capabilities only offer a partial answer, for though the first home video game consoles were closed-circuit systems featuring only a handful of games and extremely simplistic technology, even for the period, beginning with the Atari 2600, however, video game consoles have frequently shared similar technological components and, especially
today, capabilities (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Montfort & Bogost, 2009). Regarding the Atari 2600, for instance, the core microprocessor, the MOS 6507, “from a programmer’s perspective, […] behaves more or less identically to a 6502 [the same chip used to power the Apple I and Apple II], but it cannot address as much memory, a limitation that ended up affecting the maximum capacity of videogame cartridges” (Montfort & Bogost, 2009, p. 13). Though a price difference existed between the chips, $20-25 for the 6502 versus $5 for the 6507 (Goldberg, 2007; Montfort & Bogost, 2009; Moritz; O'Grady, 2009), this difference translates into roughly $50-75 today (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011), and hence it is not enough to account for the economic logics operating in the personal computing and video gaming markets.

Moreover, though relatively less expensive than early personal computers, dedicated video game consoles were still considerably expensive for the average household (See Figures 3.2-3). Hence, the rapid and widespread historical adoption of dedicated video game consoles—not to mention the ubiquity of gaming across both dedicated and general purpose new media technologies today—would appear to speak to the capacity for digital play, as it has been historically configured, to speak to the anxieties and desires of various populations. To put this more clearly, digital play has the ability to motivate players to engage in mundane and monotonous behaviors that—outside of the realm of gaming—the subject would ostensibly otherwise not choose to participate. Examples include: the Harvest Moon franchise (Natsume, 1996, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2010), a popular and long running farming simulation series, wherein the player is compelled to begin each virtual day by watering crops, milking cows, and managing the other intricacies of running a farm (See Figure 3.4); the Diner Dash series (PlayFirst, 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2010), a popular restaurant strategy franchise, wherein the player is compelled to perform the duties of a restaurant server as quickly and efficiently as
Figure 3.4. *Harvest Moon* (Natsume, 1996). Here the player is watering crops she has planted.

Figure 3.5. *Diner Dash* (PlayFirst, 2003). One would be excused for mistaking the game to be an electronic training simulator for servers.
possible within a given period of time (See Figure 3.5); as well as the incredibly popular *The Sims* franchise (Electronic Arts, 2000b, 2004b, 2010e), which offers the player the opportunity to simulate one’s imaginary life (See Figure 3.6); et cetera. My characterization of these games is not meant to position those who play these games as unrefined or cultural dupes, but rather that the fact that these games and others like them are so incredibly popular is a testament to their ability to capture the anxieties and desires of various gaming populations. Indeed, the games mentioned here, and those of the simulation and strategy genre more generally, often engage with the legitimate anxieties and desires of an array of populations: nostalgia for the days when life seemed less hectic (e.g., Harvest Moon; See Drake, 2012); recognizing the skill involved in efficiently managing the floor of a restaurant (e.g., Diner Dash; See Saltzman, 2005); and the dream of living the life you always wanted (e.g., The Sims; See Electronic Arts, 2011b). Caught up as these games are within the anxieties and desires of a given moment, however, lends them
to imagine, and thus code (that is hardwire), the game world according to various economic logics: in *Harvest Moon*, all actions are arranged according to units of energy and time; in *Diner Dash*, patrons are organized according to economic units, wherein some eat faster and tip better than others, so that the overriding logic is not providing a good dining experience per se, but rather managing the flow of customers so as to generate the most profit; and, in *The Sims*, the totality of life operates within an economic framework so that friendship, for instance, often is included as an employment variable with promotions contingent upon whether one has a certain threshold of friends—even when those friends have little to nothing to do with the employment network.

Hence, it seems to me that gaming operates as an important engine and archive of contemporary economic anxiety and desires. So that we might understand how it is that video games have come to operate as an important node in this historical, geographical, and technological terrain that constitute the circuits of production and consumption of contemporary economic anxiety and desire, this chapter is structured as follows: (1) I offer a rough history of the political economic configuration of the video game industry, focusing specifically on how certain economic logics have come to be embedded within its circuits of production and consumption; and, (2) I then explore the historical trajectory of the *Civilization* series, an iconic franchise of significant industry renown, thus offering the franchise as an electronic archive documenting the maturation of contemporary economic anxiety and desire. Throughout this chapter, my argument is that the experience we call digital play has come to function as an important site of global economic production, consumption, and thus, transformation.
Electronic Engines of Economic Transition

The emergence of the video game industry marked a fundamental shift in the economic logic of the new communication industries, and encapsulated the political economic anxiety and desire of the 1970s more generally. The computer industry, in contrast, operated as an outgrowth of the military-industrial economic model that had dominated the U.S.’s political economic system since the early part of the 20th century (Sennett, 1998). This economic system operated according to the logic of a “paternalistic capitalism,” as best exemplified by the company IBM (Sennett, 1998, p. 122). This political economic structure meant that, like an army, the company promised to take care of the worker as long as the worker remained fully committed to the business (Sennett, 1998). This managerial system went hand-in-hand with the Keynesian political economic philosophy that had come to dominate the U.S. economic system from the 1930s to 1970s (See Harvey, 2007). The U.S. government’s active involvement in maintaining this political economic interest meant that those companies working in the military-industrial sector had come to expect a certain economic routine:

The timelines and reliability requirements for military software are frequently created in a pork-barrel milieu. The software has to be extremely reliable, although in practice no software is completely reliable. […] And, as with any large project, any changes anywhere in the system must have a paper trail—revision requests, authorizations, confirmations. These are well-worn and quite serviceable histories of successful large-project management. (Stone, 1995/1998, pp. 129-130)

This economic structure guaranteed a certain sense of financial stability in return for reliable and consistent service. In other words, these corporations could charge premiums on particular commodities because these businesses had established a strong, enduring relationship with its consumer and/or government base. The emerging personal computer industry sought to replicate this model; Apple, for instance, early on sought to become “your personal computer company,” so that the question for the consumer is “not Apple but which Apple” (Clyde Folley and Maurice Goldman, qtd. in Moritz, p. 61). For those of the last few generations, however, though the
corporate appeal remains, the bureaucratic structure from which it emerged, are remnants of a history of mundane, mind-numbing labor performed by the “time-servers’ and others wrapped in the armor of bureaucracy” (See "Rico," Sennett, 1998, p. 18). The early counter-cultural hackers from which the video game industry emerged agreed.

The video game industry grew out of a fusion between certain strands of the counter-cultural hacker and student movements of the 1960s and the economic appeal of corporate capital (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). These early members of the industry wanted to experience a certain level of financial security, but wished to obtain this economic success through a hip, “play-as-work” ethos (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 12). As Jason D. O’Grady (2009) gushingly writes: they worked to prove that “you could not only have fun at work, but that pursuing a capitalist dream could be hip” (p. x). Due at least in part to their early success, this and subsequent generations have considered flexibility, being open to change and taking risks, as desirable workplace features (Sennett, 1998). Though in practice this has often meant extended hours of unpaid labor, and constant economic uncertainty, the allure of flexible labor and the promise of getting paid for doing what one loves has continued to be incredibly attractive for contemporary generations of workers (Bonds, et al., 2004; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; EA Spouse, 2004; McMillen, 2011; Sennett, 1998). And this is why the economic barriers to procuring video game commodities have historically been low: the transference of risk.

At a very early stage in its economic development, the video game industry sought multiple avenues for transferring risk to anyone who would take it—from the consumer to the workers themselves. This is in part due to an economic collapse experienced by the industry at an early point in its development, for when the industry first began it too sought to mimic the
economic structures of older, established media institutions. Just as broadcast content was
created so as to sell radio and television sets and audiences (Baughman, 2006; Smythe, 1977;
Starr, 2004), so too was game content developed to sell systems (with the major difference being
that the first consoles housed all their content within the system). Publics, however, operate
according to different economic practices than corporations and governments. Unlike broadcast
media, which could rely on advertising so as to provide the “free-lunch” of information about the
interests of regional, national, and global concern that were in heavy demand at the turn of the
century (Smythe, 1977; R. Williams, 1974/2005), the video game industry had to ask for the
consumer to invest in what was essentially a one-and-done form of entertainment. There was no
“free-lunch” that would be supplied after purchasing the unit, as with television, nor even a
razor-and-blades business model that would later come to dominate the industry—with a
significant, neoliberal difference (see below)—rather, the consumer was asked to pay a premium
for an electronic toy that offered a very limited list of features:

Here’s this thing I wanted to sell for $19.95 coming out at $100. Then in [Magnavox’s]
advertising they showed it hooked up to Magnavox TV sets and gave everyone the impression that
this thing only worked on Magnavox TV sets. (Ralph Bare, qtd. in Kent, 2001, p. 25)

Though the Magnavox Odyssey initially sold well, the market was soon saturated with other
“Pong clones” (the major game featured on these early video game consoles) and with
consumers being asked to pay from $60 to $100 (i.e., $253 to $421 today) to choose between
amongst 30 “Home Pong machines,” which could have been sold at one-third the price, the

This realization marked a fundamental reconfiguration of new media labor practices,
practices that have come to be standard operating procedure in other contemporary new media,
and non-media, industries as well. If the consumer could not be trusted to pay a premium for new
media commodities, then economic risk would need to be transferred elsewhere. For the video

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game industry, this happened in two-steps, steps that have come to be emulated elsewhere: (1) innovating the extraction of work from play and leisure; and, (2) licensing out and digitizing the razor-and-blades business model. Regarding the first, the video game industry sought to craft the appearance of being a hip, counter-cultural, play-as-work career opportunity (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Stone, 1995/1998). The atmosphere of holding meetings in hot tubs, gathering for “Friday night beer busts,” naming projects after sexy female employees, as well as drug experimentation and the prospect of playing free games, was a carefully crafted managerial strategy designed by Nolan Bushnell while at Atari so as to ensure that workers and colleagues would buy into his business philosophy (Kent, 2001, pp. 51, 56-57). And though this atmosphere proved to be fun for some—if not exclusively for male employees—low-level employees were expected to work 16-hour shifts from time to time, while only receiving a mere $1.75 per hour ($6.55 today), plus benefits to build arcade units that sold for roughly $1,200 ($4,500 today), though it only cost Atari about $300-400 to build them (Kent, 2001, pp. 51-53). Though disillusionment existed then, and continues to exist, within the industry, and elsewhere, regarding the false promises of flexible capital (Bonds, et al., 2004; EA Spouse, 2004; Kent, 2001; McMillen, 2011; Sennett, 1998; Stone, 1995/1998), the industry continues to invest heavily in sustaining the appearance of being a site of playful labor (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).

In 1977, the first step, of exploiting the playful labor of the employees of the video game industry, was established, and would come to be standard operating procedure by those who would follow in the industry. xxviii As this practice would come to mature, the playful element would come to only define those labors directly connected with software production (e.g., programmers, artists, et cetera), and even then not always (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). And even though working at some corporations, such as Electronic Arts, can offer promises of
beautiful workplace facilities, such as high-quality gyms, soccer fields, and subsidized gourmet food, the expectation is that these amenities are “just candy”:

You’ll walk around and you’ll see the amenities: is it the steam room, the fitness centre, the subsidized gourmet meals, the cappuccino machines [that contribute to EA’s economic success]? […] It’s all of that, but that’s just candy. The guts of it that makes it a cool place to be, is that the people here want to win. Trying is nice, making mistakes is okay, but it’s all about winning.

Here it is, 3:30, a gorgeous afternoon, and my soccer field is empty. But I can tell you that at 3:30 this morning, there will be 75 people in this building working their butts off. (Glenn Wong, EA-Canada president, qtd. in C. Taylor, 1999)

For others working at less established corporations, the amenities are limited to free pizza and admission to the Electronics Entertainment Expo (E3), though the expectation of all-nighters, long hours, and crunch continue to be the same (Bonds, et al., 2004); and even then, it is difficult to appreciate any workplace perks, whether at Electronic Arts or some smaller company, when structural crunch is implemented so as to make 65-80 hour work weeks common (Bonds, et al., 2004; EA Spouse, 2004). These perks as it is, however, are already becoming a thing of the past as video game corporations are increasingly outsourcing rote programming, game porting, and made-to-order artwork to “lower tax” venues (read: Eastern Europe, China, India, and Latin America) (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; C. Taylor, 1999).

This fate had already befallen those employed as physical laborers in the industry, when in 1984 Atari began to shift console manufacturing overseas to Hong Kong and Taiwan: “This was the first in a series of offshore migrations that gutted Silicon Valley as an electronic manufacturing center” (Kline, et al., 2003, p. 206). This practice was continued and perfected by Nintendo and other subsequent console manufactures (Herz, 1997), especially after the passage of NAFTA and other neoliberal policies made it easier to work across economic borders (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kline, et al., 2003). Whereas in 1977, Atari had once offered assembly and loading dock workers “Friday night beer busts” (Kent, 2001, p. 51), by 1992, Nintendo’s six distribution center loaders would barely constitute a party; this after Nintendo
opted to implement a state-of-the-art distribution center, equipped with automated robots, in North Bend, Indiana: “before, we had 20 people doing 1,000 orders a day, […] Now we have six people doing 2,500 orders a day” (Wayne Hamilton, Nintendo's Director of Distribution, qtd. in Erickson, 1992). And though Hamilton would insist that Nintendo’s shift to “just in time” manufacturing—a trend shared by other major corporations, such as Boeing and Wal-Mart—did not result in significant savings from firing people (Erickson, 1992), the infrastructure would make it easier to relocate its U.S. console and game manufacturing operations from Redmond, Washington to “free trade” zones in Mexico and elsewhere (Kline, et al., 2003). The high-tech distribution network had come to be so successful that in 1997, The Economist described Nintendo as a model “fabless” corporation—that is a manufacturing firm “with no fabrication facilities of [its] own” ("Fabulous," 1997). The shift to transnational manufacturing practices has not just resulted in the loss of jobs in the U.S., Japan, Western Europe, and elsewhere, but also increased exploitation and economic inequity in the regions in which these facilities have been relocated (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kerr, 2006; Kline, et al., 2003). For instance, at a Maxi-Switch manufacturing plant for Nintendo’s Game Boy in Cananea, Mexico, “local health officials made three to four ambulance trips a day during the summer months to rescue those who had collapsed on the production lines”; all this for $3.50 per day—not per hour—after working a ten-hour shift (Kline, et al., 2003, p. 207).

These experiences and reports of economic exploitation are amplified in that not only has the industry sought to extract the greatest amount of value from the cheapest amount of labor possible, through outsourcing and the relocation of production facilities to countries with lax labor laws, but also through the industry’s reconfiguration of the razor-and-blades business model in terms acceptable for contemporary digital neoliberal capital. As we know, the razor-
and-blades business model is geared around the concept that a given company will sell the main hardware or platform (i.e., the razor) at cost or little profit, and then seek to turn a significant profit by selling the essential, complimentary parts or software at a premium. The razor-and-blades business model became a staple of the video game industry as a response to the hardware crash of 1977. Early home video game consoles were closed-circuit systems featuring *Pong* and a handful of other hardwired games. In 1977, a flood of companies hoping to make a fortune off the *Pong* video game phenomenon overloaded the video game market with Home *Pong* consoles leading to market saturation, and then a subsequent industry crash (Herz, 1997; Kent, 2001).

Atari and other companies realized that even if the closed-circuit market had been cornered, “owning the system wouldn’t have done anything to directly influence future purchases” (Montfort & Bogost, 2009, p. 10). This led Atari and a handful of other video game companies, such as Magnavox and Fairchild Semiconductor International, to introduce open, interchangeable cartridge systems (Montfort & Bogost, 2009).

With the advent of the cartridge system, video game console manufacturers opted to follow the razor-and-blades business model so as to lock in future consumers (Kent, 2001; Montfort & Bogost, 2009). The business model, however, makes sense only “if customers are loyal or if the [company] can block other firms from entering the blade market” (Picker, 2010, p. 2). The proprietary nature of video game consoles initially served as an adequate barrier to keeping other companies out of the “blade market” (i.e., producing cartridges that could play on a competitors’ console) (Montfort & Bogost, 2009). In 1979, however, four Atari programmers left the company to establish the first independent home console video game developer (Kent, 2001; Montfort & Bogost, 2009). Every Activision cartridge sold was an attack on Atari’s razor-and-blades business model, as the expectation is that the razor-selling company will find the
majority of its profit from the selling of blades. Though Atari would later implement a third-party licensing system to deal with this situation (in 1982), the damage had already been done as an influx of independent developers had already been in existence for many years (Montfort & Bogost, 2009). In 1983, the industry crashed again, this time due to an overload of poorly designed games, as well as from the strain of having to endure a cumbersome business model (Herz, 1997; Kent, 2001; Sheff, 1993/1999). The industry had come to be too risky for all participants involved. Console manufacturers could not be confident that selling video game systems as razors was a worthwhile endeavor; after all:

If the razors are actually being sold at a loss [or little profit] then a better strategy seems clear: let the other guy sell the razors […] while you sell only the profitable blades. You don’t have to lose money on the razors if some other poor sap is willing to do so. Remember the money is in the blades. (Picker, 2010, pp. 1-2)

Consumers, whom took on risk by investing in a particular console and the purchase of subsequent cartridges with the hope that they would see a return in entertainment value, found themselves unable to distinguish the good games from the bad (Herz, 1997; Kent, 2001). And this decline in consumer sentiment towards home video game consoles, meant that whatever U.S. video game developers had survived the 1983 industry crash felt that the personal computer industry served as the more steady and viable video game market (Sheff, 1993/1999). For the home console segment of the video game industry to resurrect itself, risk would have to be reallocated across at least one of these sectors so as to make the other participants willing to return to the market.

Though the razor-and-blades business model had successfully operated in the toy-industry at least since 1959, with Mattel’s Barbie and accessories (Kinder, 1991/1993), as the experience of Atari and other console manufacturers would suggest in 1983, the model would need to be reconfigured to work for the video game industry. The model would not just be
reconfigured, however, but rather taken to new heights by Nintendo in 1986 (Kline, et al., 2003). Nintendo realized that to revitalize the comatose U.S. video game industry, the company would need to carefully regulate the amount of risk operating in the market. The razor-and-blades model in itself was not enough, for that business practice was only capable of lowering the threshold of market participation for new consumers—i.e., lower the risk of initial entry; but it could not, however, sustain this low-level of risk for returning consumers, and did nothing to protect console manufacturers from the threat of independent game developers. A free-market was a dead-market in the eyes of Nintendo, consumers, and even independent developers and retailers alike (See Sheff, 1993/1999).

To resurrect this market, Nintendo sought to regulate risk through two interlocking mechanisms: an ironclad licensing system and its technological manifestation, the 10NES lock-out chip—which worked to, or at least attempted to, prevent unlicensed parties from developing NES games. Regarding the licensing system, Nintendo recognized that the presence of third-party developers contributed to the intrinsic value of the video game console, in that games made available for the system constitute durable goods that may deter consumers from switching to other platforms, as long as the quality of those games remain high (Kline, et al., 2003). As Randall Picker (2010) explains, video games and other new media software operate differently than prior razor-and-blade commodities in that:

An Xbox customer can’t easily switch over to a new game system from Sony, even if Sony offered the game box for free. Switching means forfeiting the installed base of Xbox games. This isn’t a sunk-cost fallacy: the games are genuine usable assets that bring a functionality to the Xbox customer and that wouldn’t be available on the competing platform, at least not without spending money to buy new games for the new platform. (p. 15)

Nintendo could not provide this intrinsic value alone, for even then, in the mid-1980s, game development had become a time-consuming, expensive, and risky affair (Kline, et al., 2003). Third-party developers made up this difference, thereby adding value to the ownership of a
particular console—that is adding switching costs to the system—but to the extent that a game console manufacturer profited off the sale of game units, as opposed to hardware, then this would be value added that Nintendo or any other manufacturer would possibly never see. Hence, Nintendo worked to devise an elaborate licensing system which would allow for it to recognize the benefits of independent developers’ involvement while simultaneously minimizing any risk from their participation:

The plan had Nintendo evaluating every game and giving it a rating on forty-point scale. Licensees then would place an order for at least 10,000 cartridges. The finished cartridges, manufactured by NCL in Kyoto, would be sold back to the developers. Depending on the memory capacity required, Nintendo charged up to $9 to $14 per cartridge. The agreement stated that the price ‘includes both the cost of manufacturing, printing, and packaging the [games] and royalty for the use of [Nintendo’s] licensed intellectual properties.’ Licensees ended up taking on all inventory, distribution, and sales responsibilities—and all risks. (Sheff, 1993/1999, p. 215)

This licensing agreement clearly benefited Nintendo at the expense of independent developers in that further stipulations prohibited licensees from releasing more than five Nintendo games a year, and further required developers to agree to an exclusivity clause which forbade developers from porting any game for a period of two-years from the date of initial release (Sheff, 1993/1999); in addition, for every game manufactured, Nintendo made $5 profit, regardless of whether the game sold or not (Sheff, 1993/1999).

Whether or not the system resulted in the production of superior quality games for the consumer is a matter of debate. Nintendo argued that the policy benefited the player for:

if [the developer] could only make [games] for the NES and only make a limited number of games, then it might dawn on [the developer] that they had better make a good game […] They couldn’t afford to make many mistakes because they only had five shots a year. (Howard Lincoln, qtd. in Sheff, 1993/1999, p. 215)

The licensing system also worked to limit the flow of games, so as to avoid the “Atari-style danger of overproduction” (Kline, et al., 2003, p. 114); Nintendo’s “Seal of Approval,” thus functioned as a promise to the consumer that the video game market’s integrity, in terms of quality and quantity, remained intact (See Figures 3.7-10). The licensing review process,
additionally, did benefit developers to some extent as Nintendo offered licensees access to “Nintendo’s marketing, development, and customer services” (Sheff, 1993/1999, p. 215). And yet, though this system worked and proved to be especially lucrative to Nintendo, developers, and retailers, at least for a time, it also provided hardware manufacturers with an unprecedented level of power and introduced a culture of hard and soft censorship (Montfort & Bogost, 2009; Sheff, 1993/1999).xxix Though it could be argued that today, this culture of hard and soft censorship...
censorship has dissipated, considering that there currently exist three viable console manufacturers and a robust personal computer gaming market, we must remember that the 1980s were formative years for not only the industry but the future tastes of contemporary developers and consumers alike. Game developers frequently craft games that they themselves want to play (Haines, 2004; Kerr, 2006; Peterson, 2011), and for many programmers, artists, and game designers, those tastes were shaped during the years when Nintendo, dominated the market. In other words, the market is not an apolitical, ahistorical thing, but rather has a political economic history.

Clearly, then, the video game industry functions as an economic engine of anxiety and desire for those seeking to make a living in our contemporary economic system. From software engineers, artists, and other, frequently male-bodied, knowledge workers attracted to the promises of getting paid for doing what one loves to the often young women seeking to gain independence from traditional family structures by working at the maquiladoras in Mexico, and elsewhere, the video game industry functions as a persistent site of economic desire (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kline, et al., 2003; See also: Kirshner, et al., "Juarez"; Kirshner, Mackinnon, Shoebridges, & Simons, 2008). And yet, the promises of neoliberalism, flexible capital, or whatever name we choose to give to our contemporary global economic regime have often failed to pan out, at best, and at worse, have been implicated in the destruction of families either through increased rates of divorce (Bonds, et al., 2004) or the promotion of state-sanctioned violence and warfare (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Halter, 2006; Kline, et al., 2003; Peckham, 2008; R. Stahl, 2006; See also: Kirshner, et al., "Juarez"; Kirshner, et al., 2008). And still we play. Though the pleasure of our play may frequently be built upon the backs of others, documenting this political economic history can only offer a partial account as to why
flexible capital and its manifestation through the circuits of digital play continue to be seen, by some, not just as viable but also desirable as well. If it is true that popular culture constitutes an important site wherein political economic anxiety and desire is made, lost, and struggled over (Hall, 1983), and video games constitute an important site of contemporary culture (Bissell, 2010; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kerr, 2006; Kline, et al., 2003; McGonigal, 2011), then further, sustained, analysis is needed of the sites of culture itself, e.g., the games, if we are to understand how the anxieties and desires of flexible capital are made to resonate with our own. To this end, I offer a case study of the highly regarded and influential game franchise, Civilization. As one of the longest running and most highly regarded simulation games—amongst industry professionals, gamers, and educators alike (Charsky & Ressler, 2011; IGN, 2007; 2K Games, 2005a)—I believe that the Civilization franchise operates as a rich historical archive speaking to the ongoing economic and political anxieties and desires of various populations.

Simulacra and Civilization

In 1975, Baudrillard arrived in San Diego with “the idea that California was a testing ground of simulation” (qtd. in G. Dyer, 2010, p. x). Six-years later, in 1981, he would famously write, “The territory no longer precedes the map […]. It is […] the map that precedes the territory” (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, p. 1). Though it is doubtful that Baudrillard had video games in mind when making the statement, as he was speaking more generally of the United States’ overdeveloped and powerful media apparatuses, he did believe that the ability for the computer to “function as a mechanical supermachine” capable of modeling—that is configuring—the real at every level, was the only technology that could “still truly interest us” (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, pp. 126-127). And whether Baudrillard happened to stumble into the first Video
Arcade, the Time Out Family Amusement Center in the Northway Mall in Colonie, New York (established in 1970; Herz, 1997, p. 50), or happened to play one of the 100,000 “‘Pong’-type games produced in 1974 alone” (Sheff, 1993/1999, p. 140), as he traveled across the United States, he would have been hard-pressed not to notice the beginnings of what could properly be understood as the computer for the masses, the video game (See Chapter Three introduction).

In the three decades since Simulacra & Simulation was first written, the video game form, and the computer simulation game particularly, has gone on to fulfill promise, or was it a warning, Baudrillard made when writing that it is in the shadows of Empire “that present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with their models of simulation” (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, pp. 1-2). The popular game series, SimCity (EA Games, 1999, 2003; Maxis, 1989, 1994), for example, has been “regularly used [in civics classes and urban planning seminars] to give budding policy wonks a preview of their chosen career,” with for instance, over a hundred city mayors using the game “to demonstrate their bureaucratic chops” at the 1994 Mayors Conference in Portland Oregon (Herz, 1997, p. 221). This is in addition to games, such as Hidden Agenda, which functioned in the U.S. State Department as a training device for diplomats, as well as new FBI, CIA, and Drug Enforcement Agents (Herz, 1997); the premise of the game?

Set in a fictional composite of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Haiti, […] you play the president of a Central American country after the overthrow of an unpopular dictator. Your mission: Select a cabinet from the ranks of far-right, centrist, and left-wing political parties, finesse the superpowers, and stave off invasion, counterrevolution, riots, death threats, inflation, and a bloody coup. (Herz, 1997, pp. 220-221)

Though the intention of the Hidden Agenda was that of encouraging players to “suspend their North American viewpoint and learn to empathize with the plight of a developing nation” (Gasperini), the game’s adoption by the State Department does point for the need to examine gaming practices from within the context of both its production and consumption (Owens, 2010).
For contemporary U.S. game makers and players, this context is that of the shadows of neoliberalism and U.S. Empire. Hidden Agenda was adopted by both educators and government officials alike due to the game’s promise of serving as a faithful simulation of Central American politics; and yet, to the extent that the game (i.e., the map) worked to influence educational outcomes and policy decisions (i.e., configure reality), we can still hear Baudrillard’s laughing reminder that “the computer does not come into play as a process of simulation,” but rather as a mechanism of a third order simulacra (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, p. 127): that is, “the models […] are themselves an anticipation of the real” (Baudrillard, 1981/1994, p. 122). The map precedes the territory; the game has come to be real.

Confirmation that this is so—that is that gameplay has come to be treated as real, and subsequently carries with it real affects—is evidenced by the growing support for transforming educational models according to the logic of digital play. The push has gained most support amongst those working within the field of the digital humanities (For an overview, see Svensson, 2010). For instance, two prominent voices, Kurt Squire and Henry Jenkins, have long sought to harness “the power of games in education” (Squire & Jenkins, 2003). The belief being that, since the video game industry has had a major influence on students’ lives, it is time for research to “consider how games might be used in pursuit of engaging, effective learning experiences” (Squire & Jenkins, 2003, p. 5). And though the pedagogical effectiveness of gameplay-inspired teaching models remains inconclusive (Charsky & Ressler, 2011; Kerr, 2006), educators have advocated for the integration and adoption of gameplay models as a desirable pedagogical practice (Kee, et al., 2009; K. Weir & Baranowski, 2011). As Kevin Kee et al. (2009) has argued, though with the caveat that gameplay ought to be seen as a supplement, and not substitute for good educational practices: “why stop at reading about ancient barbarian invasions
when you can also repulse them” (p. 326). Moreover, as Claudio Fogu (2009) has suggested, the difficulty in adequately accessing the educational potential of a video game lies in the medium’s impact on the construction of historical consciousness itself:

What is a ‘historical’ video game, let alone a successful one? It is difficult to answer this question because all our definitions of history have been constructed in a linear-narrative cultural context [...] whereas digital history enters the twenty-first century exclusively under the sign of the possible; we are now interested only in what may happen and are no longer concerned with what has happened. (Fogu, 2009, pp. 103, 121)

And though this may be true, we ought to be concerned about the consequences of this transformation, for as others have pointed out, the pleasure of play comes from melding with the logic of the computer (Crogan, 2003; Friedman, 1999; Manovich, 2001). What then is the logic of education that arises from this pleasure of melding with the simulacra that is contemporary gaming? If we look to one of the more popular game models, the Civilization series (See: Charsky & Ressler, 2011; Fogu, 2009; MacDougall, 2009; Owens, 2010; Squire, In Press.; K. Weir & Baranowski, 2011), the answer would appear to be that of Western Empire (Douglas, 2002; Poblocki, 2002).

Though Trevor Owens (2010) has taken critical scholars, such as Douglas and Poblocki, to task for analyzing games apart from the context of their reception, arguing that “far from poisoning young minds, [Civilization III] is intellectually engaging on multiple levels, as a game mechanic and as a kind of laboratory for collective experiments” (Owens, 2010, p. 492), Sid Meier himself has agreed that the game is deserving of criticism for being uncritically western-centric:

I think that’s probably true. In those days, there was a little bit of a Cold War mentality about the game. The world was divided between the West and the Communist worlds, and we were trying to present the most familiar leaders, the most familiar technologies, and the most familiar ideas. [...] So I think Civilization had somewhat of a Western-centric view of the world. Just the whole idea that technology drives progress might not be so much of an Eastern concept as it is a Western one, so I think it’s true. (qtd. in B. Edwards, 2007, p. 8)
The question, then, is not whether *Civilization* advances a worldview that “is more likely to generate support for the Western superpowers than the traditional tools of cultural imperialism” (Poblocki, 2002, p. 175), for at least the first part of that question—promoting a Western worldview—has been answered in the affirmative by critical theorists and even the game designer himself (Douglas, 2002; B. Edwards, 2007). As important as that question has been, the question that ought to concern us today is rather two-fold: first, if the *Civilization* series constitutes an important site of cultural struggle, then what anxieties and desires are embedded within this historical document? Second, through what mechanisms—rhetorical, technological, and political economic—are these anxieties and desires made manifest: that is, how is this anxiety and desire activated to resonate with our own, as well as materialize through the very production and consumption of play itself? The first part of this question has been partially answered through the crude rubric of Western imperialism (See: Douglas, 2002; Poblocki, 2002), whereas little work has been done regarding the second. The rest of this section is an attempt to provide working answers.

But before it is possible to do so, that is to give an analysis of the political economic interests embedded in the *Civilization* series, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the game and its broader play mechanics. The series belongs to a subgenre of turn-based strategy games, known as 4X Games (Emrich, 1993; piL, 2009), and is widely considered as having popularized the model (Aurabolt, 2009; IGN, 2007). Alan Emrich (1993), whom is believed to have been the first to recognize this particular subgenre, describes the 4X model as follows:

*Explore, Expand, Exploit and Exterminate.* In other words, players must rise from humble beginnings, finding their way around the map while building up the largest, most efficient empire possible. Naturally, the other players will be trying to do the same, therefore their extermination becomes paramount. (p. 92)

As it regards the *Civilization* series, this means beginning the game with two units: a “settler,” which is the only unit capable of founding a city; and an initial “warrior” or “scout,” which are
Figure 3.11. This screenshot shows the starting configuration for *Civilization IV*. Note that though multiple units appear to be present (e.g., three warriors and four settlers), they only constitute just two units, as each respective group will always travel together (e.g., one settler appears as four, two settlers will appear as two distinct groups of four). In addition, note the two circular icons just above the warrior. These icons mark those two spots as containing environmental resources (e.g., corn and sheep). Resources are important as they carry with them either public benefits (e.g., health, happiness) or strategic benefits (e.g., iron for training a “swordsman” unit).

Figure 3.12. This screen shot shows the initial map configuration for the game *Civilization IV*. This global perspective illustrates how little one knows of the outside world. As Poblocki (2002) notes, the mechanics of the game functions as a “trip out of the heart of darkness [and] towards the light of civilization” (p. 168).
initially meant to be used to explore the surrounding terrain (See Figures 3.11-12). The first few turns involve the establishment of one’s initial city, which is immediately designated as the permanent capital of your emerging empire, and the preliminary exploration of the surrounding terrain with your other unit. It is important to note that “settlers” are exhaustible units, which means that the settler will be “consumed” and disappear upon establishing a city, and thus new “settlers” will need to be “trained” as needed to establish future cities. The establishment of multiple cities is essential to one’s success within the game, as these spaces constitute the only site of production for the player (See Figures 3.13-14). That is, cities are the only means by which the player can: (1) “train” units, from “workers,” to combat units, as well as more “settlers”; and, (2) construct buildings that add to a given city’s productivity and/or contribute other benefits, such as increased “happiness.” Managing one’s need to train new units with constructing new buildings operates as one of the central challenges of the game, as only one operation can be undertaken at a time within a given city. In other words, if I have one city, “Kyoto,” I must decide whether I wish to build a “granary” which will help increase the rate of Kyoto’s population growth, or another “warrior” so that I can more quickly scout the surrounding terrain; if, however, I have two cities, “Kyoto” and “Osaka,” then I can have Kyoto build a “granary” while the Osaka trains a new “warrior”—though once the granary is built, only Kyoto will benefit from its establishment, so after the warrior is trained, I will then need to build a granary in Osaka as well. Clearly, the complexity of the game is capable of quickly growing exponentially as additional cities are needed so as to balance various gameplay needs, such as training combat units while simultaneously developing cities for greater levels of production—of which, for example, there are roughly 60 units and 30 buildings in Civilization III (2001). The game helps make this manageable by operating according to a turn-based rule-set, which means
Figure 3.13. The screenshot captures the establishment of the initial, capital city in Civilization IV. The “star” icon demarcates this as my civilization’s capital city, and the “1” inside signals the population size of the city, which is then converted by an algorithm to appear as a fictitious demographic size (e.g., 1 = 1000 citizens, 2 = 6,000, 3 = 21,000, etc.)

Figure 3.14. This image illustrates the production process of a given city in Civilization IV. When a city is able to train a new unit or produce a building, the player is given a list of available options. In this case, I am able to train a warrior, settler, worker, or build a barrack. The number next to each unit/building is the amount of turns it would take to produce one of the units/buildings based on current city production levels.
that only after I have completed all possible (or desirable) moves is the next player able to act, but the challenge still remains. More could be, and will be, said about the mechanics of the game, but the above synopsis should be sufficient for adequately grasping the analysis that follows below.

As mentioned earlier, it is already well-documented that the Civilization series was and continues to be a product of the Cold War generation (B. Edwards, 2007; Poblocki, 2002). Embedded within the logic of the game is Samuel Huntington’s 1993 post-Cold War “clash of civilizations” thesis, two years prior to Huntington’s Foreign Affair publication (Poblocki, 2002). Huntington’s thesis, which Poblocki (2002) argues is more convincingly presented in Sid Meier’s Civilization series, is as follows:

- The fact that the world is modernizing does not mean that it is Westernizing.
- Asia […] is expanding militarily and economically. Islam is exploding demographically. The West may be declining in relative influence.
- Culture-consciousness is getting stronger, not weaker, and states or peoples may band together because of cultural similarities rather than because of ideological ones, as in the past.
- In a multi-polar world based loosely on civilizations rather than on ideologies, Americans must reaffirm their Western identity. (Kaplan, 2001, sec. 1)

It is the Civilization series’ consistent articulation of Huntington’s first plank explicitly, and the second implicitly, that function as the motivation for Poblocki’s (2002) criticism of the game (the third and fourth planks would not be coded within the game until the fourth rendition of the game, which tellingly came out after 9/11). The historical narrative offered by Civilization adheres to the history of Western Empire, suggesting that historical progression ought to conclude in Americanization (Poblocki, 2002). And yet, as one plays the game and technologically advances alongside the political development of the other nations, international conflict becomes increasingly more persistent. This is because culture is hard-coded within the game as that of an ahistorical thing. So for instance, in Civilization I (MicroProse, 1991b), the Aztecs, for instance, will always seek to aggressively expand, and frequently declare war on
others to do so (See MicroProse, 1991a). Since the Aztecs are culturally predisposed to be “fierce warriors and dangerous opponents” (MicroProse, 1991a, p. 137), then it is antithetical to both the logic of the game (e.g., winning) or even play itself (e.g., surviving) to engage with the Aztecs on any other level than that which suits one’s strategic interests; in other words, no matter how modern the Aztecs (or any other nation for that matter) have become, they will always continue to be Aztecs, that is, foreign, and thus, always already potential threats. Moreover, since the future of technological progression is written in advance (See Figures 3.15-16), as other countries modernize, the global playing field will necessarily become more level—and not necessarily equitable—as all developed nations will potentially have access to the same technological measures. This is the explicit and implicit lesson embedded within the narrative trajectory of the Civilization series: (1) political economic modernity is not related to cultural modernity (Huntington’s first plank); and, (2) political economic equity necessarily means the decline of a given superpower’s influence (Huntington’s second plank).

It was not until the introduction of religion, in Civilization IV (2K Games, 2005c) that the third and fourth planks of Huntington’s thesis became coded within the series, and thus explicit. This is important for it suggests that what had before been theoretically implicit in 1991—that cultural-consciousness is getting stronger and that Americans must thus reaffirm their Western identity—had gathered enough cultural salience in 2005 to warrant gameplay consideration. Prior to the implementation of this gameplay mechanism, the diplomatic options of the Civilization series held fast to the Cold War logic of nation-states as relatively self-contained, competing superpowers. Though technology could be traded between civilizations, in addition to tribute, in Civilization I, all diplomatic actions would conclude with an “agreement of peace or a declaration of war” (MicroProse, 1991a, p. 127). Civilization II (MicroProse, 1996b) and III
Figures 3.15-16. (top-bottom). Though the tech tree initially begins with possibility, and calls for strategic planning (Figure 3.15), the future is destined to culminate in a scientific “future tech” regardless of the civilization desired (Figure 3.16). Screen capture taken from Civilization V.
(Infogrames, 2001b) offered additional diplomatic options, such as the ability to form “alliances” (MicroProse, 1996a, 1996b) and establish “trade embargos” (Infogrames, 2001a, 2001b), but continued with the political economic logic of the Cold War as a framework for understanding diplomacy. In other words, democracy and communism were deployed by the U.S. as competing political economic superpowers, in the sense that the Soviet Union was first imagined as constituting a political economic threat to the United States before it then became conceived as a physical threat: “The United States found itself increasingly driven by the need to placate class antagonism, and thus anticommunism became the overriding imperative” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 176). The threat was not driven by scarcity of resources—the 1973 Oil Crisis notwithstanding—for scarcity itself was the outcome of political economic policy, such as embargos; nor was the threat that of military annihilation—though this would later become a possibility as a consequence of political economic policy. Rather, the threat was that “if the political offensive is long delayed, it will be too late for bombs” (James Burnham, qtd. in O’Gorman, 2009, p. 395). In other words, the Cold War framework for understanding international politics was that if the United States did not act aggressively, the cultural integrity of its political economic system would perish (O’Gorman, 2009, p. 395). The Cold War was a war over political legitimacy, and the Civilization series carries with it the residue of that political struggle.

The first three iterations of the Civilization series worked to fine-tune this logic as a gameplay mechanism. Indeed, in all games within the series, containment, as James Burnham had argued in 1952, is not enough (O’Gorman, 2009). For the first three games, in particular, every mechanism of international politics operated exclusively through political economic means: embassies, trade agreements, military alliances, et cetera (See: Infogrames, 2001a;
MicroProse, 1991a, 1996a). Though these mechanisms could be used to contain other civilizations, through for instance establishing a trade embargo, containment as an end in itself was coded as an inefficient strategy. This is because the game is predicated on winning, and winning has been defined in zero-sum terms throughout the series (See: 2K Games, 2005b, 2010a; Infogrames, 2001a; MicroProse, 1991a, 1996a). It is, however, important to note that the categories of what constituted winning transformed and crystalized over the span of the ten-years separating Civilization I from Civilization III; and this deserves further analysis before we move on, for it speaks to the transitioning cultural logics that separates Civilization I through III from Civilization IV and V.

As mentioned earlier, Civilization I through III digitally captured Huntington’s “Clash of the Civilization” thesis in gameplay form. The logical thrust of this thesis was encoded within the Civilization series in terms of a zero-sum logic in that only one nation could come out the victor over the course of a given game session. Equally important, regardless of which nation happened to win a particular session, as a historical simulator, the lesson taught is that only one nation will win. For the first game in the series, Civilization I (MicroProse, 1991b), winning can only occur through one of two ways: military domination or survival—with the latter being a consolation prize (See MicroProse, 1991a, p. 43). Civilization II (MicroProse, 1996b) adhered tightly to the victory conditions outlined in Civilization I, but updated one aspect of the first game—the space race—to constitute an additional victory condition. Already, as Sid Meier himself has noted, we can see the cultural anxiety of the Cold War having embedded itself in the game through the designation of the space race and military domination as victory conditions (See B. Edwards, 2007). With the introduction of Civilization III (Infogrames, 2001b), however, we can see the beginnings of the implementation of Huntington’s third and fourth planks, and the
shift towards a post-Cold War global politics, or what Hardt and Negri (2001) have called Empire. This groundwork for this shift within the series was initiated through the creation of three additional victory conditions, on top of the two established earlier: dominating the world (i.e., possessing “the vast majority of the world’s land and population”); diplomatic triumph (i.e., be elected Secretary-General of the United Nations); and, cultural victory (i.e., reach a particular threshold of “cultural points” through the construction of wonders or other city improvements) (Infogrames, 2001a, pp. 150-153).

Through the establishment of these victory conditions, we can see that the Civilization series has come to encode the anxiety embedded within Huntington’s third and fourth plank. But first, the victory condition of dominating the world, reinforces Huntington’s second plank—“Asia is expanding militarily and economically”—by digitally coding the possession of significant landmass and population size as constituting victory conditions in their own right, thereby granting legitimacy to the notion that large countries, particularly China, constitute a political economic threat by virtue of their girth alone. Though it can be undoubtedly argued that within the logic of the Civilization series that any nation could theoretically function as China—from the Aztecs to the British to, yes, the Chinese—the point is not that China or any other country is called out as potential threat to U.S. hegemony, but rather that the victory conditions themselves grant legitimacy to the notions of threats to victory itself. In other words, it could very well be that in a given session of gameplay that it is the Aztecs whom have come to possess the largest population and most land, and thus win a cultural domination, and clearly the Aztecs have long since passed as a viable nation; and yet, the lesson to be learned, the common-sense passed through the simulation of this given game session, is that a large population and equally large landmass operate on the same terrain in terms of global hegemony as that of military
dominance. In contemporary terms, to the extent that the Civilization series offers itself as an allegory of history, with multiple simulations running to advance the logic of historical progress itself, which is both what its detractors and supporters alike argue (See: Douglas, 2002; Fogu, 2009; Kee, et al., 2009; Owens, 2010; Poblocki, 2002), then regardless of which nation wins a particular simulation, the logic of winning and conditions upon which this victory are made are granted legitimacy: the U.S. model of technological progression is certainly a viable means of winning (e.g., space race or military domination), but now, players must recognize that so too are “Eastern” alternatives (See B. Edwards, 2007, p. 8), such as possessing significant landmass and population size, equally viable pathways to winning global hegemony.

The addition of two other victory conditions functions as further instantiations of U.S. anxiety and desire regarding the global political economic order. Whereas global domination, in terms of population and landmass, resonates with a discourse that suggests the BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) constitute a threat to U.S. hegemony, by virtue of size alone—without recognition of their dependence upon transnational corporations for economic functioning (Schiller, 2007)—the cultural and diplomatic victory conditions offer alternative models for simulating how U.S. global hegemony can be maintained. Civilization III’s inclusion of a diplomatic victory option, as coded in terms being elected Secretary-General of the United Nations (Infogrames, 2001a, 2001b), recognizes a shift in global politics that Hardt and Negri (2001) argues has come to be the hallmark of contemporary Empire: that is, the increasingly mixed-constitution of global hegemony (pp. 309-314). The recognition of the U.N. as constituting a legitimate site of power, as simulated from Civilization III onward, resonates with the transforming global position of the United States. As Hardt and Negri note, though the U.S. is capable of acting alone to sustain its global hegemony, it “prefers to act in collaboration with
others under the umbrella of the United Nations” (Hardt & Negri, 2001, p. 309). But again, if, as Kacper Poblocki (2002) argues, the Civilization series operates as a more compelling digital enactment of Huntington’s “Clash of the Civilizations” thesis, then so too does the series offer a more compelling take of the anxiety and desire embedded within Hardt and Negri’s thesis of Empire.

But first, public awareness of the transforming constituency of global politics is documented in the changing game mechanics of the Civilization series. In Civilization I (1991), the United Nations functions exclusively as a forum for resolving “international problems through diplomacy” (MicroProse, 1991a, p. 83). For the player, then, serving as the home of the United Nations (much in the same way that New York currently does) offered the benefits of underwriting all peace treaties, thereby making it so that when negotiating “with other civilizations, they will always offer to make peace with you” (MicroProse, 1991a, p. 83). In 1996, Civilization II was released, with the developers seeking to enhance “the effects of Wonders we thought were too weak (e.g., […] United Nations)” (MicroProse, 1996a, p. 180). To strengthen the benefits of establishing the UN, the game developers opted to recognize the United Nations’ increasing role as a global peacekeeping organization (See: MicroProse, 1996a, 1996b). This is important for two reasons. First, gameplay mechanics meant that civilizations which had adopted republic or democratic forms of governances could have military endeavors overruled by the their respective Senate; possession of the United Nations, however, granted the player a “50 percent chance to override the Senate’s interference in foreign policy negotiations” (MicroProse, 1996a, p. 41). In essence, the United Nations had come to be seen as a potentially anti-democratic organization capable of serving military interests through “peacekeeping” missions as much as it sought to negotiate peace. And indeed, this relates to the second important
point, in that this gameplay mechanism reflects the increased emphasis the United Nations has placed on peacekeeping missions. According to the United Nations, 66 peacekeeping operations have been undertaken since first beginning in 1948; of those 66, however, 53 of them have taken place after 1988 (United Nations, 2011). In the mid-1990s, during the development of *Civilization II* (1996), several high profile peacekeeping missions, such as those of Rwanda (1993-1996; United Nations, 2001, 2003) and the Former Yugoslavia (1992-2002; United Nations, 1996, 2002), concretized the notion of peacekeeping within the U.S. public imaginary—and *Civilization II* functioned as one site wherein which it was codified. With *Civilization III* (Infogrames, 2001b), the political legitimacy of the United Nations was recognized by being codified as a victory condition itself; in essence, whomever controlled the United Nations by definition controlled global politics. This is a fantasy of course, but deserves further consideration for the narrative trajectory of the United Nations, as embedded within the game series, simultaneously works to both document and activate U.S. anxiety and desire over the political potential of the UN.

Indeed, obtaining a diplomatic victory is challenging to the extent that how other civilizations view you is contingent upon a variety of factors, many of which are beyond control: such as the cultural predisposition of a given nation and how your civilization compares to others (Infogrames, 2001a, 2001b). Though these variables may be accurate factors for understanding how any relationship operates, whether interpersonal or international, the valence granted towards them and the victory condition upon which they are contingent are invested with an explicitly U.S. political economic outlook; the *Civilization II* (1996) manual foreshadows this anxiety embedded within the diplomatic victory option of *Civilization III* (2001) quite well: “If you are the largest, most powerful, and richest civilization in the world, all rivals are likely to be
very demanding or antagonistic. [...] Leaders with whom you are allied tend to become jealous as your civilization grows larger and more powerful” (MicroProse, 1996a, p. 123). From this perspective, if one were to adopt the rubric of international relations offered by Civilization I, II, and III, it is difficult to see how the United Nations could operate as a viable mechanism of U.S. global interests. Again, it is important to note that the question is not whether the player—or computer for that matter—has opted to play as the United States, but rather that in seeing the game as a historical simulator running through different scenarios for achieving global domination, then, to the extent that the parameters offered are that jealousy is an overriding variable governing international politics, it is clear from the game that the United Nations functions as an inadequate mechanism for obtaining and sustaining global dominance. And yet, how then is the United States to maintain its hegemonic status: if global domination is not an option—as the BRIC nations have more land and people; if military domination, though possible, is no longer desirable, as the public is weary of war—“war weariness” was codified in Civilization III, and most greatly affected democratic governments (Infogrames, 2001a, p. 42); and, if rapid global modernization means that the United States may not be able to hold onto its technological edge for too much longer? The answer would resonate strongly with Huntington’s fourth plank that “Americans must reaffirm their Western identity” (Kaplan, 2001): Civilization IV (2K Games, 2005c) would incorporate religion and culture as global factors (See also 2K Games, 2005b).

Prior to Civilization IV (2005), culture and religion had operated as national constructs significant for internal governance, but only indirectly related to global affairs. For instance, in Civilization I (1991), religion and culture were symbolically represented in terms of “cathedrals” and “colosseums,” but the effect of their presence was that of “making unhappy people content”
(MicroProse, 1991b, p. 69). With Civilization II, the concept of culture remained the same—that is as a means of alleviating internal dissent—but religion was expanded so as to operate as a form of governance as well as a mechanism for pacifying the masses (as it had done in Civilization I). This conception of religion as constituting both a public good (e.g., “making unhappy people content”) and, in some cases, a form of government, is important to dwell on momentarily for the latter, governance, feature was removed in Civilization III (2001). That “Fundamentalism” as a legible form of governance was introduced in Civilization’s 1996 iteration, but removed in Civilization III (2001), suggests that for a brief moment, the U.S. cultural imaginary had come to recognize that, as Stuart Hall would later write: “politics, having been exhausted in its social-democratic-liberal-reformist form, leaves only a much more extreme, indeed archaic, form, which has come back into the present” (qtd. in MacCabe, 2008, p. 38). Again, it is worth quoting the developers of Civilization II at length:

The people in such [Fundamentalist] societies are often fanatically devoted to their beliefs, and may be willing to die, use force, or commit great atrocities to preserve them.

[...]
The diplomatic penalties for “terrorist acts” (such as bombing city improvements, poisoning wells, and so forth) committed by Diplomats and Spies is reduced, since the world comes to expect no better. (MicroProse, 1996a, p. 68)

Like the introduction of the U.N.’s peacekeeping function in the same game (Civilization II), so too did the coding of Fundamentalism as a legible form of governance correspond with shifts in global politics.

During the period between the release of Civilization I (1991) and II (1996), the United States was forced to come to terms with the experience of “Middle Eastern terrorism [arriving] on American soil” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008). Though the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center may have brought the possibility of experiencing terrorism into the U.S. cultural psyche, however, the removal of a form of governance “based on religious fanaticism” (Infogrames, 2001a, p. 45), suggests that the West, and U.S. in particular, had remained “stupid
about […] religion” and the inability for “liberal humanism” to speak to the needs of a significant portion of the world (Stuart Hall, qtd. in L. Taylor, 2006). Or, perhaps it was merely a case of “bad timing,” and that as Civilization II suggests, the U.S. public was ready to take the challenge of religious fundamentalism seriously, but that the kairos of this event was lost amid the drama of President Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky (See The New York Times, 1998), and thus, subsequently removed in Civilization III as the interest in religion as a political form faded away. Whatever the reason for its removal, however, it is doubtful that had religion remained in Civilization III that, due to the “Clash of the Civilizations” thesis simulated within the game, the inclusion of Fundamentalism would have offered an alternative solution to Middle Eastern politics than that suggested by The New York Times (1998): “The United States has every right to attack suspected terrorists if there is credible evidence showing that they were involved in attacks against American citizens or were planning such attacks.” Indeed, if as Baudrillard (1981/1994) writes, “present-day simulators attempt to make the real, all of the real, coincide with [Empire’s] models of simulation” (p. 2), then embedded within the gameplay logic of the Civilization series has always been the models necessary for showing that credible evidence indeed exists. In the aftermath of 9/11, these models would need to be updated; hence, Civilization IV (2005).

The problem with the earlier models simulated in the Civilization series was that international politics “often felt quite arbitrary one civilization might like you while another hated you” (Johnson, 2005, p. 181). So though in 1996, understanding global politics in terms of a Cold War framework of competing superpowers had continued to prove sufficient—“if you are the largest, most powerful, and richest civilization in the world, all rivals are likely to be very demanding or antagonistic” (MicroProse, 1996b, p. 123)—in the aftermath of 9/11, such models
proved to be inadequate: the “problem that diplomacy suffered from in previous Civ games was a lack of motive” (Johnson, 2005, p. 181). In a world where “culture-consciousness is getting stronger, not weaker, […] Americans must reaffirm their Western identity” (Kaplan, 2001, sec. 1); the question, how? The answer was to rethink the role of religion and culture in the formation of contemporary global politics. Religion and culture were no longer merely rituals that brought happiness to various national publics (MicroProse, 1991b; Infogrames, 2001b), nor even political systems that informed the governmental logic of a given nation-state (MicroProse, 1996b), but rather recognized as having “always played a critical part in human history” (2K Games, 2005b, p. 77). If 9/11 functioned as a moment of crisis for contemporary Empire, working to unveil the condition of global politics, and the catalyst of this event was “religion – which we forgot about” (Hall, qtd. in MacCabe, 2008, p. 38), then the inclusion of religion and culture as political variables would ensure that Civilization IV could adequately simulate the history of the present that we had failed to remember. Though the game designers opted to implement a missionary-based system, as opposed to a trade routes model, the overall model offers a “useful back-story to give diplomatic dealings more logic” (Johnson, 2005, p. 181). Coupled with politics being embedded with culture, in that “many leaders [now] have a favorite civic and might pressure you to follow their lead,” it is inevitable that “diplomacy will break down with one of your rivals, and [thus] war” (Johnson, 2005, p. 180). In many regards, the revised diplomacy system offered in the game operates as a model for understanding why the United States must reaffirm its relationship with Europe, if it is to combat the threats presented from other cultures; for if, “One often has to make a long-term choice of trading partners, knowing that trying to make everyone happy may leave you with no friends at all,” and various nations are already predisposed to particular forms of governance and religion (Johnson, 2005, p. 182), then one must be sure to
remember who really is one’s friend: for, as former President Bush famously said: “They hate our freedoms; our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other” (Bush, 2001). Don’t believe him? Play Civilization IV.

In fact, the simulation may have worked out too well in illustrating President Bush’s stance on foreign policy: “In Civ IV, the religions were primary factors of who liked whom and who disliked whom” (Jon Shafer, qtd. in PC Gamer, 2010, p. 2). The challenge has been that in the aftermath of the persistent state of exception that has been the war on terror, the ability for Empire to adequately grasp the complexity of the world has shown strain, and thus, religion in itself has proven itself to be an inadequate mechanism for modeling the tenuous state of contemporary global politics. The predictability of religion in Civilization IV no longer offered a
compelling model for simulating the present, and thus diplomacy needed more depth (See PC Gamer, 2010); the role of religion had to be rethought. In fact, the whole concept of the state itself had to be rethought. Hence, *Civilization V* (2010) removed from the model any notion of organized religion as an explicit factor in international relations, along with any pure notion of a government as being “democratic,” “communist,” et cetera (2K Games, 2010b, 2010a). Government was now modeled as a collection of particular social policies that developed over time (See Figures 3.17-21).

In some regards, this change represented a more compelling historiographical account of social transformation, in that historical continuity exists in spite of historical ruptures (such as the French or U.S. revolution) (See Foucault, 1977/2003). And yet, the model simultaneously makes historical ruptures absolutely necessary in some instances. More clearly, *Civilization V* offers 10 different branches of social policy: tradition, liberty, honor, piety, patronage, commerce, rationalism, freedom, order, and autocracy (2K Games, 2010a, 2010b). The residue

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**Figures 3.18-20.** Here are three examples of the various sub-policy layouts within the social branches offered in *Civilization V*. As a particular social branch is fleshed out over time certain sub-policies require that certain prerequisite policies already be in place (as represented the lines connecting the various icons from top to bottom).
of various forms of government can be found within these social policies; for instance “democracy” can be found within “freedom” and variations of fundamentalism can be found under “piety” (2K Games, 2010a, 2010b), but these social policies can to some extent be mixed to create unique forms of government; for example, “piety” (the religious social branch) can be mixed with “order” (the socialist branch) and “commerce” (the economic social branch). And yet, under no condition can “piety” be combined with “rationalism,” nor “order” with “freedom” (2K Games, 2010b; 2K Greg, 2010).xxxvi This is a fascinating and absolutely arbitrary design decision, as game patch 1.0.1.332 illustrates (which made “order” and “freedom” no longer compatible”), for it resonates with global developments that were underway during the period of Civilization V’s development; that is, the much reported wave of social protest that have swept through Middle Eastern countries as of late, of which new media technologies and platforms, such as Twitter, have been heralded as the tools for social revolution, and thus the enemies of non-Western forms of government: “Twitter will doubtless be cast a protagonal technology that enabled the powerless to survive a brutal crackdown and information blackout by the ruling authorities” (Ambinder, 2009). This logic is coded within Civilization V in that, though any form of governance can utilize any form of technology without penalty, should a pious country opt to advance along the technology tree more rapidly, that is, become more rational, then they must adopt rationalism as a social policy, which the game recognizes as initiating a revolution: one turn of anarchy during which all production, scientific research, and commerce come to a complete standstill (2K Games, 2010b). When Western secularism meets Middle Eastern spirituality, one must give.

And yet, new communication technologies are not necessarily friends of Western conceptions of freedom (e.g., neoliberalism) either, as illustrated by the city of San Francisco’s
Bay Area Rapid Transit agency disabling cell phone networks in anticipation of anti-police brutality protests (Huppke, 2011) and British activists’ use of social media to organize protests (Malik, 2011)—of which British Prime Minister David Cameron quickly undercut as saying, “this is not about poverty. It’s about culture. A culture that glorifies violence, shows disrespect to authority, and says everything about rights but nothing about responsibility” (qtd. in Solon, 2011). In many regards, Civilization V’s seemingly arbitrary decision to pit piety (i.e., religion) and rationalism (i.e., science) against each other adds cultural legitimacy to the claims made by Prime Minister Cameron: rationalism is the enemy of religion, not freedom (2K Games, 2010a, 2010b). Granted, rationalism is not the enemy of socialism (i.e., order) nor fascism (i.e., autocracy) either; and yet, this is all the more reason that Western liberalism (i.e., freedom) ought to control technology: Civilization V shows what can happen if technology ends up in the end of nations organized by socialism (e.g., China) or piety/autocracy (e.g., Iran): order is useful for empires “interested in creating massive, sprawling” civilizations; and, autocracy is “well suited for those wishing nothing more than to crush their foes under the weight of their iron-plated boots” (2K Games, 2010a, p. 95). Though, in terms of gameplay, these social policies may be embraced by many players as mere gameplay choices—as in, one game session I may wish to achieve a science victory (e.g., rationalism) whereas in another I may opt for a military victory (e.g., autocracy)—the lesson imparted is that free, rational governments (e.g., Western) are most interested in scientific progress, whereas pious, autocratic governments (e.g., Middle Eastern) desire nothing more than either absolutely converting the world and/or destroying those countries which resist. As such, if Civilization IV (2005) functioned as the zenith of Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of the Civilizations” thesis, then Civilization V (2010) offered the necessary corrective to
the simulation, which was needed for modeling the prolonged aftermath of the persistent state of exception that has been the war on terror.

**Civilization Preceding Civilization**

From the above, it is clear that the *Civilization* series functions as a site of Western anxiety and desire regarding global politics. Events from the contemporary moment, such as the coming of age of international terrorism and the peacekeeping missions of the United Nation, have a way of working themselves in as mechanisms for gameplay consideration. The game, however, is more than just a site of, what Steve Jones (2006) has called “virtual history,” that is, an installation capable of offering “alternative educational environments and alternative philosophical and theoretical systems” (p. 209). As Baudrillard (1981/1994) has argued, in an era of simulation, the models themselves are “immanent,” operating “in the cybernetic sense, that is, of the manipulation of the [real] at every level” (p. 122). In this sense, if technology works to construct “the kind of world the machine needs” (Ellul, 1954/1964, p. 5), and if it is Empire that stands behind, but does not necessarily control, the circulation of present-day simulators (Baudrillard, 1981/1994), then we ought to understand the *Civilization* series, alongside those of other simulation technologies, as working to construct the kind of civilizations that Empire needs. My point is not that the act of simulation in and of itself necessarily leads to the upholding of Empire, as a rich tradition of cultural critique has made significant use of modeling as a means of preparing for and/or enacting social change (See Rodriguez, Rich, Hastings, & Page, 2006); rather, my point is that when those modeling efforts enter the realm of digital play, they must necessarily rearticulate portions of the logics embedded within the gaming practices of contemporary Empire: “good” simulations, however defined, still rely upon much of the same infrastructure and economic circuits of production and consumption as the “bad” simulations, for
instance; and, to the extent that adherence to particular generic conventions are necessary in order to remain legible as a viable form of digital play, then even progressive simulations are likely to rely upon the same gameplay mechanisms as those embedded within conservative simulations (Galloway, 2006; MacDougall, 2007), and thus ought to make us question the limits of critique within established modes of digital play (in its totality). Hence, though this examination focused primarily upon Civilization as a simulacrum of contemporary global politics, I would like to use the remainder of this chapter to make connections between this global politics analysis and my stated interest in the games’ functioning as a site of political economic anxiety and desire.

The global politics embedded within the Civilization series operate primarily through an economic rationality. Civilization presents a world of political conflict and the solution offered is that of the temptation of total informatic control:

The massive “making equivalent” in Civilization—the making equivalent of different government types […], of different victory options, of formulaically equating n number of happy citizens with availability of luxuries, and so on—is, in this sense, an allegorical reprocessing of the universal standardization that go into the creation of informatics networks today. (Galloway, 2006, p. 101)

This temptation for total informatic control is the central hallmark of contemporary neoliberalism in that neoliberal theory desires a means of “projecting [the formal principles of a market economy] on to a general art of government” (Foucault, 1978-1979/2008, p. 131). From the perspective of this economic philosophy, the role of the state is to secure and procure markets, whether they exist or not (Harvey, 2007). As Alexander Galloway (2006) argues, the Civilization series succeeds in massively reconfiguring complex political systems into numerically representative equivalences. And yet, though everything is capable of speaking the same language—that is, zeros-and-ones—the simulacra of civilization offered does not operate apart from ideology as Alexander Galloway (2006) ultimately concludes (See pp. 102-106), just as the
free market is not free from construction (See: Foucault, 1978-1979/2008; Harvey, 2007). As Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger (2009) have argued, the desire to make things equivalent for the sake of management (i.e., control) has long been a part of the political economic history of the United States. Indeed, at various points throughout the *Civilization* series, cultural strength charts not so dissimilar to that of the “Racial Adaptability Employment Chart of the Central Tube Company” in Pittsburgh (1925) have been deployed—if only being different in terms of overall complexity (See Figures 3.21-22). From this historical perspective, it would seem that though ideological analysis is no longer enough in terms of semiotics alone, at least when it comes to new media technologies (Galloway, 2006), ideology serves as more than merely a decoy in this postmodern world of ours. For indeed, as I have sought to argue, it is the ideology of Empire that serves to underwrite contemporary gaming—in the case of the *Civilization* series, primarily through the matrix of a neoliberal political economy.

Though the representation and encoding of global politics has transformed throughout the *Civilization* series, if anything has remained constant, it is in its consistent representation of the city as the necessary engine of contemporary capital (See: 2K Games, 2005b, 2005c, 2010a, 2010b; Infogrames, 2001a, 2001b; MicroProse, 1991a, 1991b, 1996a, 1996b). In 1993, reviewing the game for the journal of *Simulation & Gaming*, Pierre Cobeil (1993) found it peculiar that the city occupied such a central position within the game design of *Civilization I*. Everything that the player does begins and ends with cities: cities must be improved so as to increase production; cities must be connected so as to facilitate trade; cities—and not necessarily the countryside—must be defended so as to keep them from being captured; and military units must be sent to secure potential sites for the establishment of new cities so that one’s Empire may grow. Cities were codified as the engines of Empire. This had the effect of requiring that all
Figure 3.21. Racial Adaptability Employment Chart for the Central Tube Company of Pittsburgh (1925). Used with permission from Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger (2009).
124 cities maintain a constant state of growth, as a stagnant city is an unproductive, useless city.

Encoded within the game is the absolute requirement that a city must always produce: a unit, building, or surplus science or taxation, work must always be done. If a city is not producing, then it must mean anarchy or corruption (See: 2K Games, 2005b, 2005c, 2010a, 2010b; Infogrames, 2001a, 2001b; MicroProse, 1991a, 1991b, 1996a, 1996b). If nearly two decades ago, Cobeil (1993) found this preoccupation to be peculiar, but otherwise only noteworthy as a gameplay mechanic, today—and indeed even then—we cannot be so dismissive. As Cameron McCarthy (2011) has argued the battle over the present and future is “taking place within the
remaking of the city as cities such as Chicago, Buenos Aires, New York, Nottingham, Manchester transform themselves from administrative and industrial centers to brand spanking new global metropolises” (p. 92). From the standpoint of Civilization, every city ought to be a global city, and thus is always under constant renovation.

Thirty-five years ago, James Carey (1975/2009) lamented that “because we have seen our cities as the domain of politics and economics, they have become the residence of technology and bureaucracy. Our streets are designed to accommodate the automobile, our sidewalks to facilitate trade, our land and houses to satisfy the economy and the real estate speculator” (p. 27). In Civilization, there are not even streets, sidewalks, nor even houses. There is only the desperate attempt to construct what Paul Virilio (2004/2005) has termed the city of panic:

> If the city is the most important political form of history, then the world-city that is contemporary with the age of planetary globalization does, indeed, have its back to the wall. And that wall is now the wall of time—‘the time barrier’; this real and astronomical time that has now outpaced the time of calendars and the ephemeris. (pp. 69-70)

This anxiety is captured well in Civilization, for if a city does not have its back to the wall, that is, if it is not producing at the most efficient rate possible, producing both military units for defense and buildings for even greater levels of production, then the only option left is to build city walls themselves (See 2K Games, 2010b). As Baudrillard (1994) pointed out, “the real is, in fact, the last resource of metaphor, but that resource must not be called on—on pain of death, on pain of losing its metaphorical power, its power of illusion” (p. 104). In Civilization, one must build as if their back is against the wall, and then, if that metaphor fails, one must literally build walls as that last chance for survival, so as to avoid being captured by another nation. The problem is that eventually, one runs out of things to build, and then there comes a point where it is absurd to produce more units, and so one must at last give in and build walls. If there is a counterfactual history embedded within the logic of Civilization, it is this: sooner or later we will
find ourselves with our backs against the wall, and unlike the game, this reality will not end as soon as we conquer all other rivals. This is both our political economic anxiety and desire.

Notes:

xxvi This event is important for two reasons. First, that the first popularly available new information and communication technologies were available in public spaces, bars and taverns no less, speaks volumes about the classed economies of video games and new ICTs more generally. Second, though two weeks may seem like quite some time for an arcade cabinet to overflow with coins, one has to remember that arcade games were an unknown form of entertainment. The following story from Al Alcorn, the programmer behind the arcade version of Pong is illustrative: “[Bill Gattis, the tavern manager for Andy Capp] said to me, ‘Al, this is the weirdest thing. When I opened the bar this morning, there were two or three people at the door waiting to get in. They walked in and played that machine. They didn’t buy anything. I’ve never seen anything like this before” (qtd. in Kent, 2001, p. 44).

xxvii O’Grady (2009) is speaking specifically of the success of Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs, of Apple fame, but his enthusiastic claim applies equally well to the video game industry, which had been working to craft the “capitalist dream could be hip” image several years prior to the establishment of Apple—while Steve Jobs was merely a low level employee at Atari (See Kent, 2001).

xxviii At least this is the case amongst Western video game corporations, such as those based in the United States, Australia, and elsewhere, where high rates of employee turnover are common (Bonds, et al., 2004; Kerr, 2006; McMillen, 2011). This may not, however, be the case with Japanese video game corporations, which have demonstrated exceptionally high employee retention rates (Kerr, 2006).

xxix For instance, for years Nintendo forbade the appearance of nudity or blood in any of its video games.

xxx I opted to use the game Civilization IV for figures 3.11-12 as this game offers the clearest images of the city founding and production processes. However, graphic quality aside—or in the case of Civilization VI, too high of a quality—the overall mechanics remain relatively the same from game to game, though their differences are important and will be discussed.

xxxi In Civilization IV (2005) it is possible to change your capital to another city by building a “Palace” in the desired city. This feature, however, was not included in Civilization V (2010) nor any of the other games in the series.

xxxii I use “Civilization” and/or “Civilization series” to speak of the overall trajectory of Sid Meier’s game series. When referencing specific iterations of the game, I will mention the numbered version explicitly (e.g., Civilization I or Civilization II).

xxxiii Whereas Civilization IV (2005) offers the clearest images for discussing units and city production, it is Civilization V that offers the clearest documentation regarding the technology tree. Yet again, the differences will be discussed.

xxxiv The objective of the Civilization franchise, in terms of gameplay, is to achieve global dominance. Though the mechanism by which global domination is achieved has changed throughout the history of the franchise, winning by survival, which is recognized in game as making it to the year 2050—designated as “The End of Time”—signifies not so much domination, but more of a global stalemate. As the manual for Civilization V (2010) puts it: “If no one has achieved victory, the game ends automatically at the end of 2050. The scores of all surviving civs will be tallied and a victor announced” (p. 117). This form of victory offers no sense of pride for the player, in that nothing is marked as significant in terms of play style—e.g., culture, technology, et cetera—it is merely a recognition of being slightly above average, as opposed to outstanding.

xxxv The introduction of “civics” in Civilization IV as opposed to the conventional “types of government” utilized in the prior games, points to the beginnings of the fragmentation of a unified notion of the state.

xxxvi On June 28, 2011, patch 1.0.1.332 was released for Civilization V which had, amongst other effects, the result of coding “freedom,” “autocracy,” and “order,” as all mutually exclusive social policies (See 2K Greg, 2010).
CHAPTER FOUR
THE STRATEGIES OF PLAY: BALLISTICS OF ANXIETY AND DESIRE

Though ultimately an absolute success in terms of cultural and economic impact, with over $1b in retail sales worldwide (Activision-Blizzard, 2010), the launch of Activision-Blizzard’s *Call of Duty: Black Ops* was met with unintentional controversy just one week prior to the game’s release. The controversy stemmed not from the game’s choice of thematic content, the Vietnam War, nor the hyper-masculine game culture that had sprung up around the *Call of Duty* franchise and First-Person Shooters (FPS) more generally (See gtz, 2011), but rather Activision-Blizzard’s “There’s a Soldier in All of Us” advertising campaign. The advertisement, which appeared on November 5th, 2010, featured a collection of various civilians, ranging from teenagers in casual clothing to adults in professional attire, in a deserted field engaged in military combat—complete with assault rifles, missile launchers, helicopters, and other contemporary weaponry (see Figure 4.1). Though Kobe Bryant, and to a lesser extent Jimmy Kimmel, bore the brunt of the criticism...
for their participation in the commercial as role models, the main criticism of the advertisement stemmed from the nonchalant portrayal of military conflict as just another, if not more exciting, form of entertainment—something to be done after (or even during!) one’s free time. Indeed, the aesthetic appeal of the commercial was exactly that stark juxtaposition of various professionally dressed individuals, from a businesswoman to a Best Buy employee, fast food worker, and more, walking calmly across an active battlefield to the sound of the Rolling Stone’s “Gimme Shelter” (See Figure 4.2). Mark Medina (2010) of the L.A. Times captured the negative sentiment toward the commercial well, with his reaction of: “I think the commercial featuring a happy-go lucky vibe with ordinary citizens pretending to be in combat downplays the seriousness that real combat entails.” The controversy was one of borders: play here, fight there.

And again, though Bryant (more so) and Kimmel (less so) bore the brunt of the controversy, as namable faces capable of being blamed for their participation—that is for their

![Figure 4.2. Call of Duty: Black Ops’ “There’s a Soldier in All of Us.” Here, a professionally dressed woman walks calmly as a missile explodes behind her—in the next frame, she stoically aims her gun towards the offending target in retaliation.](image)
blurring of the borders—the image that ought to hold our attention most is that of the nameless concierge employee attempting to do his job in the midst of a warzone, for only he appears to be flustered by the chaos (See Figure 4.3).xxxvii One can imagine him shouting, like Hassan al-Bahadli (an Iraqi-citizen), “Seven years! Seven years, and these explosions are still going on?” (qtd. in, Shadid, 2010). How difficult it must be to conduct business, let alone live, amidst the torn billboards, shattered lights, and broken windows that are markers of the ongoing violence of Baghdad; the affect is enough to leave one “in a [cultural] coma” (Yusuf Mahmoud, qtd. in, Shadid, 2010). And yet, whereas Hassan al-Bahadli, Yusuf Mahmoud, and others, grow ever more disillusioned by the broken promises of a seemingly unending War on Terror—a war which has made the exceptional ordinaryxxxviii—the concierge employee’s irritation is aimed at the normality that would intrude upon the exception: the phone call. If security forces in Iraq are critiqued for using cell phones as a means to avoid doing their jobs, to escape the exceptional (See Shadid, 2010), then, like Alice’s looking-glass in Lewis Carol’s (1871/2010) Through the

Figure 4.3. Call of Duty: Black Ops’ “There’s a Soldier in All of Us.” The concierge visibly flustered while answering his phone in the midst of a warzone.
Looking-Glass, the concierge’s cell phone carries the burden of exposing the permeability of global anxiety and desire between the here and there of domestic spaces: play here, war there, only it would seem as though *everything is backwards*.

To be clear, then, the controversy stemmed not from the presence of civilians within a war torn environment, for that phenomenon had already been sanitized in the early 1990s, when the politics surrounding Operation Desert Storm actively worked to reconfigure the parameters of war (R. Stahl, 2010b). Specifically, the presence of civilian bodies in war torn environments had been dealt with through the circulation of the phrase “collateral damage,” which functioned to depersonalize and legitimate “the death of civilians [by] transforming destruction into a legitimate byproduct of a noble endeavor” (R. Stahl, 2010b, p. 27). Neither was the controversy, however, necessarily the happy-go lucky vibe of the citizens, for war has long been understood to operate as a site of madness, conflating humor with hell, and thus one more reason to support (and protect) those troops willing to enter this irrational space on our behalf. For again, as Roger Stahl (2010b) argues, though the juxtaposition of humor and hell in films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) may have ruptured the link between military service and moral development, this new configuration of war as hell (and the effect this had on those who served) came to serve as further reason to support our troops. As such, the commercial did not downplay the seriousness that real combat entails, for the sanctity of real combat has long since ceased to exist. The controversy, then, was that of a breach in the perimeter of the here and there of what Roger Stahl (2010b) calls *militainment*: the act of translating state violence “into an object of pleasurable consumption” (p. 6). This, then, is where the controversy lies: in the here and there of “there’s a soldier in all of us,” missing was a state capable of demarcating the when
and the where of the borders of hell, and thus the threat of viewing violence upon ourselves as objects of pleasurable consumption.

The anxiety and desire of the war on terror stems, then, from the reterritorialization of civil space in terms of military space and reconfiguration of military force in terms of a global, hyper-police force (Virilio, 2004/2005). This ongoing project differs from prior reconfigurations of national space, in that though borders have long been a concern of the nation-state, in terms of determining who may legitimately enter, as well as who has legitimate claim to the various spaces reserved within the nation (Ono & Sloop, 2002), the concern post-9/11 has been that of universalizing the politics of the border itself (Agamben, 2004/2008; Rajan, 2008). The importance of this move to globalize the border is not necessarily whether the mechanisms used to surveil the subject are successful, but rather that these mechanisms of control, previously demarcating which actions are appropriate for the interior or exterior, have become entangled so that the interior is considered a potential warzone and the exterior in need of a police-like, peacekeeping force. Examples of this include: the militaristic response to Hurricane Katrina within the United States and the continued presence of a “peace-keeping” force in Iraq, roughly ten years after victory was declared in 2003 (BBC News, 2003) and nearly eight years after the establishment of a transitional Iraqi government (BBC News, 2012). To be clear, September 11th was not the beginning of this transformation, but rather demarcated that moment when the reconfiguration (and legitimation of this reconfiguration) entered popular consciousness, for already well before 9/11 were arguments being advanced for the reterritorialization of civil space as just another military space, and the need for a corresponding military force capable of responding to this transformation:

The most obvious challenge faced by the United States and its Marine Corps is the worldwide breakdown of order. […] governments are losing their monopoly on organized violence. The result, as Marines have seen in Somalia, Lebanon, and Los Angeles, will be chaotic situations in
which ethnic groups, street gangs, clans, and other non-state actors wage the war of “all against all.” (General Charles Krulak, 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, 1996, p. 2)

The *Call of Duty: Black Ops* “There’s a Soldier in All of Us” advertisement captured well the latter part of General Krulak’s concern for a “war of all against all,” but featured the wrong combatants: “ordinary citizens” (Medina, 2010) as opposed to “ethnic groups, street gangs, clans,” and other terrorists. The inversion of anxiety and desire in operation in the advertisement, then, exposes the consequence of transforming civil space into a standing-reserve for military space; indeed, the outcry resonates with the anxiety and desire embedded within the military projection of power abroad. Again, General Krulak (1996) is instructive:

*Operational Maneuver from the Sea* deals explicitly with the full spectrum of challenges that we will have to face [...] and the very exciting prospect of adapting the tradition of maneuver warfare [...] to all aspects of warfare. (italics added).

Like General Krulak, the public has often shared this enthusiasm for the “shock and awe” approach to warfare when the targets are set on those abroad (Compton, 2004); when the potential targets may be us—however defined—as when proposals are made for extending the operations of drone technologies to within the United States, conversely, anxiety regarding the potential abuse of military power centers on the conception of borders: here is a problem, over there is none (Feuerberg, 2012; Lowy, 2012). And yet, as Paul Virilio (2004/2005) commented, our post-9/11 obsession with borders betrays the fact that we have yet to come to terms with the consequence of our configuration of national space as thoroughly extraverted: “Emancipated from all geophysical location, offered up to the chaos of a terminal neocolonial empire that is turning life on its head, for from now on: ELSEWHERE BEGINS HERE” ([capitals in original] p. 111). In other words, when civil space is conceived as standing-reserve for military space—i.e., already at hand, deployable—then so too must every citizen be ready to answer the call for combat: hence, “There’s a Soldier in All of Us.” The anxiety, then, is that this may be the truth
of our desire: the inversion of civil space as military space which is necessary for the production of the soldier in all of us may ultimately result in a war of all against all.

The anxiety extends only as far as one’s conception of the border, however. The fact of the matter is that the controversy is not that of what it means to be a soldier or that there are soldiers, but that in defining citizens as soon-to-be-soldiers, the consequences of this configuration are to be felt on this side of the border. As Eric Garris, webmaster of the libertarian anti-war.com, speaking of another toy that had inadvertently exposed the ongoing diffusion of the border, Ever Sparkle’s “Forward Command Post” (See Figure 4.4) commented:

War toys have been around forever, but the problem here is the change in focus. Before such toys were more in line with the ideas of self-defence.

[...]

This is not just another war toy—it’s a total paradigm shift in the war toy industry. It’s setting up the young people for this new kind of war, where soldiers come into your house and take it over when they need to. ([italics added] qtd. in, Foss, 2002)
Though coverage of the controversy wrapped the debate in a framework of concern regarding the effects of violent toys on children (Foss, 2002), the paradigm shift addressed is explicitly one of borders or anxiety over the lack thereof—a fear that what had typically been reserved for over there may now come to fruition right here. As Snopes.com (2006) humorously observed, “an ‘antidote’ toy was also available for purchase by concerned parents […]: the World Peace Keepers Battle Station”; this toy, now called the “Power Team World Peacekeepers Military Life Playset” (See Figure 4.5), has yet to attract similar controversy, and is still readily available from JCPenny as of this writing. The controversy that surrounded both Ever Sparkle’s “Forward Command Post” and Activision-Blizzard’s Call of Duty: Black Ops “There’s a Soldier in All of Us” advertisement, and the lack of controversy surrounding the “Power Team World Peacekeepers Military Life Playset,” suggests that the criticism Activision-Blizzard received was not about the gamification of warfare—for this convergence has been of increasing importance to development and functioning of the U.S. military (See “War and Cinema Video Games” below)—but rather that Activision-Blizzard and Ever Sparkle each touched upon the anxieties embedded within the transforming structures and theaters of modern warfare.

More than militainment, then, the threat of the “There’s a Soldier in All of Us” Campaign and toy’s like Ever Sparkle’s “Forward Command Post” is that, these representations of civilian space as potential military space suggest that there really just might need to be a soldier in all of us; or rather, that in the aftermath of 9/11, all space is potential military space, and hence, we may already be in the process of being reconfigured along the lines of a citizen-soldier-subject. Missing from the controversy, however, is an equal concern for the battlefield in itself, whether here or there, for little concern has emerged over the inclusion of contemporary weaponry in video games when enemies are the appropriate targets: them and not us. Moreover, though the
convergence between military and gaming technologies, in terms of training simulations and software interfaces, has garnered criticism from critical scholars and a handful of journalists (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Halter, 2006; R. Stahl, 2006, 2010b), the concern that matters, from the perspective of the game developers, is that of how to most appropriately portray military space (See: Edge, 2011b; Goodrich, 2010). As Greg Goodrich, executive producer of Electronic Arts’ Medal of Honor (2010c) wrote:

“This is a voice that has earned the right to be listened to. It is a voice that we care deeply about. [This is] because the heartbeat of Medal of Honor has always resided in the reverence for American and Allied soldiers. (Goodrich, 2010)

Indeed, it is this same concern and reverence for the battlefield that almost kept contemporary military games from coming into existence in the first place, not because of fear that they might promote the militarization of the U.S. nation, but rather out of fear that they might not adequately do so; it was only after receiving the blessing of military personnel—and not other concerned parties—that the contemporary (First-Person Shooter) military game genre was born (Edge, 2011b; Poplak, 2010). And again, to further iterate, the controversy and concern has continued to be one of borders, not necessarily content: in 2010, Electronic Arts received criticism for allowing for gamers to play as the Taliban during multiplayer sessions; this criticism dissipated after Greg Goodrich opted to change their name to “Opposing Force.” The problem was not that the Taliban were in the game, but that we might play as them and kill us—the inversion of borders.

Considering the accelerated convergence of military and gaming technologies, and modes of representation, it is reasonable that many would be concerned with how borders are conceived in military games. Interfaces have converged to the extent that one would have difficulty discerning which is play and which is reality (See Figures 4.6-7). Past, present, and near-future military scenarios collapse upon each other due to the gravity produced from the speed of their
Figure 4.6. An image of the MQ-9 Reaper screen interface from the U.S. Air Force’s (2011) “Changing Warfare Video.”

Figure 4.7. An image of the MQ-9 Reaper screen interface from Activision-Blizzard’s (2011) Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3’s “Black Tuesday” level.
cultural circulation, so that it is now difficult to discern the plotline of the Cold War from the War on Terror (See: Activision, 2007a, 2009a, 2010a, 2011b; Milius, 1984; THQ, 2011b). The dizzying effect has resulted in the justification of the present (i.e., the state of exception) in terms of a near-future threat (i.e., the War on Terror) made known through a history deferred (i.e., the past is prologue). If the visual simulator made it so that “seeing and foreseeing […] tend to merge so closely that the actual can no longer be distinguished from the potential” (Virilio, 1984/2009, p. 4), then the historical simulator makes it so that memory and anxiety merge so closely that the present can no longer be distinguished from the prophecy. The battle to prepare for (future terrorism) becomes the battle itself (the War on Terror). The intoxication of this prophecy fulfilled, a world in which borders are losing their meaning—that is, a world in which civilians are military targets—has indeed worked to bring out the soldier residing in all of us: “for the first time since the establishment of all-volunteer forces in 1973, the US military has met all of its recruiting goals [in 2009]” (Holmes, 2009). Though it would be too simplistic to attribute a one-to-one correlation between military gameplay and military recruitment (Mcginn & Boesveld, 2009), the military-funded recruitment game, America’s Army, is believed to have had “more impact on recruits than all other forms of Army advertising combined. [At] just .25% of the military’s total advertising budget” (Edery & Mollick, 2009, p. 141); and beyond military-recruitment tools, commercially-funded military-themed games are so popular amongst military personnel that at one point Halo 3 was “widely known as the most popular activity for off-duty soldiers” (McGonigal, 2011, p. 2). Clearly, then, the convergence between the military and video game industries means that play itself is coming to be an integral part of the war machine; as the U.S. Air Force proudly touts on its website: “IT’S NOT SCIENCE FICTION. IT’S WHAT WE DO EVERY DAY” (See Figures 4.8-9; U.S. Air Force, 2011). Modern warfare, then, is not just
the name of a video game franchise (i.e., *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*)—an object of mere entertainment—but a site wherein digital play and contemporary warfare are entangled to such an extent that: (1) video games operate as a site of experimentation (popularizing the combat scenarios and producing the subjectivities necessary for contemporary and future warfare); and,
modern warfare, in turn, depends upon the subjectivities and interface technologies associated with digital play.

This chapter, then, is an attempt to detail the rough trajectory and consequences of this convergence between the “science fiction” of virtual play and the reality of what “we do every day.” This analysis is increasingly urgent, for though the cultural imaginary has long intersected with the political real, the gap between the two has become increasingly tenuous. This has occurred on two fronts: (1) as Walter Benjamin (1935/2006) and Martin Heidegger (1938/1977) each noticed in the 1930s, photographic technologies have dramatically transformed our conception of time and space so that our experience of a given moment can be expanded exponentially. An example of this is the amount of visual information extracted from Iraq and Afghanistan in the year 2010 alone would take one person four decades to watch (The Economist, 2010). Hence, this glut of information has (2) required the ability to process information at an ever increasing rate if one is to act upon the logistical edge gained from this amplification of time. If this has at-once meant the increasing reliance upon algorithms for the operation of the military (The Economist, 2010), it has also resulted in the need for militarized subjects capable of quickly extracting complex information from abstract representations so as to properly operate within this increasingly abstracted environment. Video game technologies and gaming literacy encapsulate these two fronts in that digital play operates through an abstraction of the world (e.g., head-up displays create a one-to-one equivocation between the health of the avatar and numerical representation) and simultaneously educate the player to operate within this abstraction (Crogan, 2003). The imbrication of video game technologies and military operations, as suggested by the U.S. Air Force (See Figures 4.8-9), urges us to understand the consequences of this gamification of modern warfare, in terms not just of technology, but cultural anxiety and
desire as well; for how does this gamified military technology operate as an extension of, and thus enable us to act out upon, the anxieties and desires embedded within digital play.

This analysis of the relationship between digital play and the military-industrial complex is of increasing importance, for in 1984, Paul Virilio convincingly wrote of the effects cinema had on the logistics of military perception, but the technological limitations of cinema—unlike digital play—could not overcome the tension between seeing and foreseeing: cinema was capable of editing the field of vision (e.g., popular films) necessary for the legitimation of military action or focusing the field of vision (e.g., the gun sight) so as to extend the reach of the war machine, but never both simultaneously—a gap existed between both functions (See Virilio, 1984/2009, pp. 40-58, 85-111). The interactivity of the video game, and digital technologies, has obliterated the gap. The screen is now an interface (Manovich, 2001), compelling the potential to act upon the actual. What is needed, then, is a critical ballistics capable of accounting for the effect of virtual play upon the development and deployment of that interface. Ballistics refers to the forces—from wind speed to bullet velocity and more—that affect the trajectory of a given projectile. Utilizing these principles allows for forensic scientists to work backwards from a given event so as to discern how it may have occurred: does the bullet entry point suggest suicide or murder? In this manner, I am suggesting that so too ought critical game studies to be concerned with matters of ballistics. As Robin Wagner-Pacifici (2009) argues, “In a world in which a (now former) U.S. president articulates preemptive war as official strategic policy, sociological investigation of ‘futures in action’ […] is profoundly important” (p. 705). Video games are one such site where we bear witness to the ballistics of “futures in action.” And yet, the undertaking of this investigation “is not to assume that [these future projections] come true, but to explore the ways they deeply infuse social interaction, albeit in possibly contradictory and
surprising ways” (Mische, 2009, p. 702); so though video games may not dictate the path of a
given action—just as bullet velocity alone is not enough to guarantee the trajectory of a given
projectile—one would be foolish to ignore the force of this variable upon the matrix that is
contemporary global conflict. That is, how might working backwards from a given military
projection show how the arc of the missile launched from the battleship follows that of the
simulated trajectory of the video game?

The form of critical ballistics that I am calling for, then, requires that those interested in
the operations of modern warfare understand how contemporary consumer technologies are
imbricated with historical, ongoing, and near-future military campaigns. This form of analysis
requires that we understand both the form of technology and the cultural logics embedded within
its operation; that is, if we are to grasp the logistics of perception, we need to look at more than
just what a given technology, such as film (e.g., Virilio, 1984/2009), enables, but also to the
media contents as well. This is because though film technologies, for instance, may be capable of
capturing any given target via close-ups and mid- to long-shots, thereby transforming the
possibilities of modern warfare (Virilio, 1984/2009), the popular contents of cinema legitimates
some targets as deserving of certain forms of mise en scène vis-à-vis others. Likewise, if game
studies is to incorporate this form of critical ballistics into its analysis of modern warfare, then it
seems as though we must open up the militainment model as well. For though the concept in its
contemporary configuration is important for understanding how the citizen-subject is being
redefined “as a member of the ranks” (R. Stahl, 2006, p. 126) and does acknowledge that gaming
technologies helps to facilitate this transition from citizen to citizen-soldier, the terms current
conception conceives of the citizen as a consumer—as opposed to a co-producer—of
contemporary logics of warfare:
We ought to cautiously follow this narrative to its conclusion, however. The metaphors of “interface” and “tele-action” imply a re-arming of the user, a high-tech reintroduction of the citizen-soldier. Dominant trends in post-industrial war suggest the opposite to be the case, however. The citizen has been progressively disarmed and dissociated from playing an active role in the actual military institution. Rather than reversing these trends, the interactive war intensifies them, encouraging the citizen to engage in a closed, constructed system that channels the civic urge through fantasies of military participation. […] The “interface” between citizen and military is therefore not one where the citizen has any real role in “playing the war,” but rather should be thought of as a sophisticated means through which the military-entertainment complex “plays the citizen.” (R. Stahl, 2010b, p. 47; See also: R. Stahl, 2006, pp. 125-126, 2010a, pp. 80-82)

I argue for the opening up of the militainment model, for I believe that collusion between the military and digital play does not need to result in the manifestation of a real-life Ender’s Game to enable citizens to have any real role in “playing the war”; rather, can we not conceive of these virtual-citizen-soldiers as the eager first-response testers of the interface, algorithms, and technologies of present and future warfare? If game studies is to incorporate the form of critical ballistics that I am calling for, then, it seems necessary to conceive of digital play as more than just a closed system, and rather consider gaming as being a site wherein new technologies, interfaces, and algorithms are tested for their deployment upon particular populations.

This chapter, then, operates as a preliminary analysis of how the anxieties and desires embedded within the technologies associated with digital play have affected the trajectory of modern warfare; for if video games are an important site wherein we witness the mobilization of anxiety and desire, as I have claimed throughout this dissertation, then so too must gaming have had an effect upon the configuration of modern warfare. To undertake this critical ballistics analysis, this chapter is organized as follows: (1) I provide a brief overview of the relationship between technology and the functioning of modern Empire; (2) I place the advent of video game technology within the reconfigurations of modern warfare; (3) I trace the emergence of video games as culturally legitimate sites of historical knowledge; (4) I look to the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare franchise as a provocative site at which to explore the production and consumption of contemporary crisis; and, (5) I look at the political implications of the Modern
‘Warfare series’ functioning as a work of fascistic art. The central argument that I aim to make is in following the history of the video game, we are able to document the historical production of the citizen-soldier of the near future; that is, the reconfiguration of the public as standing-reserve for the near future-conflict.

**Opening the Eye of Empire**

It is well-documented the role communication technologies have had in the formation and maintenance of the public sphere (Habermas, 1991; Starr, 2004). The importance of early print culture for the establishment of the public sphere has led many to christen free access to the media as in itself procuring and securing the manifestation of a popular, fourth estate (Ambinder, 2009; McChesney, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2007; Nichols & McChesney, 2009; Starr, 2004; Wu, 2006). If technology is politics by other means (Starr, 2004), however, then one must ask what bodies are excluded or forced to be reconfigured in order to participate in this de-politicized/re-politicized public sphere (Fraser, 1997; Squires, 2002). Posing this question is not to call upon a caricatured and much-maligned theoretical standpoint of technological determinism, but rather to suggest that the political effect of a given technology is bound up within all that constitutes the formation of that medium, institution and infrastructure alike (Heidegger, 1954/1977a). In the case of communication technologies, then, for instance, print media could come into existence as a medium for the propagation of a particular definition of the public and the management of colonies at distance (Carey, 1983/2009). One does not have the privilege of saying this here is the technology and that over there is an aberration to those who suffer at the hands of technological dissemination.

That communication technologies are vehicles of power, capable of both transmitting and reconfiguring culture (Carey, 1975/2009), though not always articulated, has long been
understood, particularly by those with a vested interest in political outcomes. The U.S. South, for instance, adamantly opposed the federal government’s interest in nationalizing and expanding the telegraph in 1844 out of a concern that this and other national infrastructure projects “would strengthen the industrial north” (Starr, 2004, p. 164). So, though many in the U.S. North held out hope that the telegraph might function to bind together a nation on the brink of falling apart, those in the South knew well the politics of this technology: the compression of time and space more suited to the industrial north than the agricultural south (Carey, 1983/2009). The difference in techno-enthusiasm, then, depends on which side of the border one stands: here or there. If the U.S. South seemed paranoid—and to be clear, I am in no way defending the racial politics of the Confederates—then the British enthusiasm for the transatlantic telegraph ought to vindicate their anxiety, if not their politics (See: Carey, 1983/2009; Starr, 2004); as James Carey (1983/2009) notes:

> Although colonies could be held together with printing, correspondence, and sail, the hold, as the American experience shows, was always tenuous over great distance. Moreover, in colonial arrangements, the margin had as much power as the center. Until the transatlantic cable, it was difficult to determine whether British colonial policy was being set in London or by colonial governors in the field—out of contact and out of control. (pp. 163-164)

Facilitating a particular definition of democracy here and expanding colonialism there are both embedded in the history of the telegraph, and contemporary communication technologies more generally; for it was only through the development of this and subsequent communications infrastructure that a system could emerge from which the “center of an empire could dictate rather than merely respond to the margin” (Carey, 1983/2009, p. 164). Embedded within contemporary communication technologies, then, is the definition, and hence possibility, of imperialism.

That empire existed prior to the development of the telegraph and other contemporary communication technologies ought not to undermine the significance these new media
technologies had for national and international politics. Though it is true that the telegraph and other new mediums arrived in a world already undergoing significant political economic transformation, the development, implementation, and reception of a particular technology are consequences of particular political economic interests and struggles (Gitelman, 2008; Starr, 2004; R. Williams, 1974/2005). If the old colonial empires were in the midst of industrialization, updating both economic and military systems, then so too were they in need of a parallel communications revolution so as to maintain their respective empires. And though this does not mean that the advent of new communication technologies necessarily align with the needs of the historical powers of a given period, we still ought to recognize the contexts and alliances that attempt to shape which political possibilities emerge from the production and consumption of a given technology (Bratich, 2009). For the telegraph, the historical context was that of Colonial Empires in search of a means compressing time and space so as to keep the colonies from leaving the political economic gravity of colonialism (Carey, 1983/2009) and the alliance was that of state-sanctioned monopolies (Wu, 2010). Hence, the telegraph emerged as part and parcel with contemporary Empire; for though the telegraph could exist without Empire, contemporary Empire could not exist without the telegraph and subsequent communication technologies—embedded within contemporary communication technologies is the definition, and hence possibility, of imperialism.

Though the telegraph initially affected the practices of commerce and governance most (Carey, 1975/2009, 1983/2009; Czitrom, 1982; Starr, 2004), the compression of time and space brought about by the communications revolution quickly proved to be necessary and transformative in matters of military concern as well (Kittler, 2002/2011; Virilio, 1984/2009). Empire was faced with the logistical challenges of managing the evermore complex armies
necessary for bringing about its desires. If modernity had brought about the technique of discipline (Foucault, 1975/1995), the colonial empires were having difficulty extending this logic beyond their borders:

When Napoleon […] created a battlefield, he was able to concentrate prevision and decision in one act of looking, and without neglecting detail he could re-establish organization and control with unequalled speed. But when Napoleonic warfare spread to the vast expanses of Russia in 1812, drawing in half a million men on the French side alone, this type of visual organization underwent logistical collapse. (Virilio, 1984/2009, p. 75)

The theater of imperial desire itself had to be disciplined if Empire was to survive its own modernization:

In the wars of old, strategy mainly consisted in choosing and marking out a theatre of operations, a battlefield with the best visual conditions and greatest scope for movement. In the Great War, however, the main task was to grasp the opposite tendency: to narrow down targets and to create a picture of battle for troops blinded by the massive reach of artillery units, themselves firing blind, and by the ceaseless upheaval of their environments. (Virilio, 1984/2009, p. 87)

Advances in visual and communications media worked in conjunction to discipline the battlefield (Kittler, 2002/2011; Virilio, 1984/2009). Visual media technologies, such as cinema and photography, worked to recompose the fragmented battlefield so as to discern patterns of conflict that were often unclear to the combatants themselves (Kittler, 2002/2011; Virilio, 1984/2009). Communication technologies, in turn, worked to communicate this information of the battlefield from frontline to central command and back again; this had the effect of not only allowing for the center of Empire to dictate rather than merely respond to the margin (as Carey [1983/2009] argued), but also to reconfigure warfare along the lines of the general tendency as opposed to the individual event (Virilio, 1984/2009). If the combatants of warfare could no longer grasp the massiveness of the conflict, conversely, the effects of mediation upon warfare are such that Empire has lost sight of the combatants themselves, for all that matters now is the general tendency (Virilio, 1984/2009). As the contemporary idiom, “you may have won the battle, but you lost the war,” reminds us today, what matters most within the logic of Empire is
the ability to see beyond a given battlefield so as to take in the complete theater of operations itself—modern warfare no longer imagines itself as an organic, episodic conflict, but rather foresees itself in the general tendency of the simulation.

To be clear, the conception of a peoples or nation has always only existed within the social imaginary of communication practices (Carey, 1975/2009; Hall, 1983; McLuhan, 1964/1994). The difference, however, is that the advent of new communication technologies enabled Imperial desire to impose its “point of view” upon those beyond its national borders (Virilio, 1984/2009)—thereby breaching the conception of a border itself. Prior to these new communication technologies, Imperial desire groped blindly beyond its borders, hoping that the foreign other would buy into the imaginary community of Imperial order, rather than corrupt the center (See Conrad, 2004); beyond the threshold of the border, Empire could never be sure how its message was received (Bhabha, 1994) or if it even arrived, that is, if it was intercepted (Kittler, 2002/2011; Virilio, 1984/2009). True, this anxiety persists today with firewall systems and other advanced encryption methods, however, the opening of the imperial eye—made possible via the advent of new communication technologies—has transformed the crux of those concerns: meaning is no longer sought only through visible displays of power (e.g., military bodies), but now also through “invisible weapons that make things visible—radar, sonar, and the high-definition camera of spy satellites” (Virilio, 1984/2009, p. 89). These invisible weapons that make things visible, that is the eyes of Empire, do not operate at the level of the individual, but rather from the perspective of Imperial desire, thereby imposing a particular point of view upon global order. Collateral damage and other rhetorical figures are the tell-tale signs of this Imperial perspective. These are not empty rhetorical figures, but rather accurate descriptors of the material consequence of the Imperial vantage point; for as Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman
Communication technologies enable this operation of Empire at distance, and from a distance, the subject is little more than an object of Imperial desire.

This, then, is the paradox of contemporary communication technologies: the linking up of the multitude with that of the anxieties and desires of Empire. The opening up of the Imperial eye has at once enabled the subject to meet Empire eye-to-eye, but when that eye is that of the mechanical eye of the smart-bomb or predator drone, the point of view exchanged is rather one-sided. This ability to not just surveil but also discipline at distance is not the only possible outcome that has resulted from the opening up of the Imperial eye, but it is no aberration either; it is rather a part of the built in logic of contemporary communication technologies. The origins and ongoing development of contemporary communication technologies, whether initiated from the public, private, or military sector, were often undertaken for the advancement of Imperial desire: long-distance telephony (Wu, 2010); the transatlantic wire (Starr, 2004); film and photography technologies (Virilio, 1984/2009); and the computer and contemporary digital technologies (Friedman, 2005; Hassan, 2008/2011). Though these technologies have long since left the closed-circuit of the military and economic elite, the influence these institutions have had on the uptake and ongoing development of these technologies continues. This is especially true as it regards the concern of this dissertation, the video game.

War and Cinema-Video Games

In 1984, Paul Virilio understood the pilotless drone and other “guided” weapons to be the culmination of the fusion between war and cinema technologies: “the fusion is complete, the confusion perfect: nothing now distinguishes the functions of the weapon and the eye” (p. 104).
The resulting fusion brought about further confusion, however, in that the eye itself is increasingly alienated from its own weaponry:

Proponents of a separate career field [for Drone Operators] have held strong convictions, pointing to the unique technical skills required to operate UASs as sufficient justification. […]. [Col Michael McKinney] believes that […] Airmen can learn to extract three-dimensional situational awareness from a two-dimensional screen. ([Italics added] Cantwell, 2009, pp. 68-69)

The extension of the eye into mediated space necessitated visual rehabilitation: learning how to extract three-dimensional situational awareness from a two-dimensional screen. The solution emerged nearly simultaneously; for with warfare becoming increasingly mediated, Ralph Baer would note:

Shooting at targets in an arcade game is not too different technically from shooting at targets in a weapons training exercise. The same interactive video technology works well in both scenarios. (qtd. in, Halter, 2006, p. 85)

Ralph Baer would know. Though more famously known as one of the founding figures of the video game industry, Ralph Baer was also a prominent developer of weapons-simulation and weapons-training systems (Halter, 2006); indeed, his invention of the first video game console in 1967, nicknamed the “Brown Box” and later sold in 1972 as the Magnavox Odyssey, was initially classified as a top-secret military training device up until 1968 (Kline, et al., 2003, p. 92). From its beginning, then, the video game would operate as the new domain of warfare; for when one cannot reasonably distinguish between the screen and reality, the screen takes precedence:

Though even a single civilian casualty ought not to be taken lightly, the focus on alleged collateral damage distorts the essence of the drone program. Technology allows for highly trained operators to observe targets on the ground for as much as 72 hours in advance. Software engineers typically model the blast radius for a missile or bomb strike. Lawyers weigh in on which laws apply and entire categories of potential targets—including mosques, hospitals, and schools—are almost always out of bounds. All these procedures protect innocent civilian life. ([Italics added] Dhume, 2011)

In essence, the eyes of those on the ground are not to be believed, for even beyond allegations of corruption (whether them or us), we have modeled the strike in advance, and have had that
model approved by lawyers, and on that screen, no one of innocence died. If this sounds like a video game, it is because it is: why should we be surprised “that the age of media technologies is at the same time also the age of technical warfare” (Kittler, 2002/2011, pp. 41-42; See also McLuhan, 1964/1994, p. 339).

The video game is a site of military anxiety and desire. The technology emerged within a Cold War political economic environment that was looking to evacuate the constraints of the political real. The fracturing of the globe along axes of a Communist and Western World, and subsequent military stalemates throughout the war, produced significant amounts of cultural fatigue within the United States. Capitalism found itself under siege from its inability to procure new economic markets in physical space, which was necessary for continued economic expansion. In essence, the Cold War produced the conditions for the collapse of capitalism, in that to the extent that Empire requires new labor and commodity markets for continued growth, the Communist World proved to be an impenetrable wall against Western desire. Coupled with the long-brewing political malaise of African American populations (See: Hughes, 1951/2002; M. L. King, 1963/2002) and other civil rights movements, Empire found itself on the verge of imploding from within and without, as it could no longer procure the political, economic, or moral resources necessary to sate the demands of the multitude. As Hardt and Negri (2001) argue, the saturation of the globe along the lines of two competing Empires would have been the death of both the Communist and Western World had the tension not been overcome. The Western World survived not necessarily because it was the more viable political economic system, but rather because it was able to procure new domains for political economic expansion: the virtual. In the 1970s, Financial Markets began the transition from real-time to virtual-time, thereby producing new sites of economic exchange: the futures market (Harvey, 1990). This
economic extension into virtual space resulted in the acceleration of the virtualization of contemporary military forces as well.

Modern military forces had already been undergoing virtualization through the use of cinematic technologies which enabled the extension of the eye across time and space (Virilio, 1984/2009). The evacuation of the Western economic market, from manufacturing to a service- and “cognitive” capital-based society, undercut the physical infrastructure of the military. Though the United States could procure materials and resources from its network of transnational markets, when those markets would not comply, due to political unrest, its military capabilities would be compromised: the 1974 Oil Crisis affected more than just public and commercial transportation (Virilio, 1984/2009). With the enforcement of imperial interests increasingly being augmented and supplemented via virtual means as it was, the 1974 Oil Crisis offered an economic incentive to accelerating even further the virtualization of the military, through the mass adoption of flight simulators and other virtual training technologies (Virilio, 1984/2009). Though these flight and combat simulators were expensive—$35m and $18m for a cutting-edge flight and tank simulator in the 1970s respectively (Halter, 2006)—the technologies proved to offer effective equivalencies between the experience of virtual- and real-time and space (Virilio, 1984/2009).

It was within this environment that Ralph Baer developed the video game console under the auspice of it being a low cost alternative to conventional military training systems (Halter, 2006; Kline, et al., 2003); and though Baer would later claim this to be a ruse, “let’s call it what it really is: TV Games,” history would prove otherwise:

[In the 1970s] Ralph Baer […] developed a groundbreaking series of interactive video systems at Sanders Associates that used interactive videotape and, later, videodisc, to train soldier rifle marksmanship [and] antitank artillery. (Halter, 2006, p. 151)
More than just low-cost alternatives, however, the military-industrial complex benefited from the cultural imagination of the video game industry:

For example, human animations, which you see a lot in games—people jumping, fighting, running. Well, if you dress these human animations up in military uniforms and have them running in single file in formation and you feed that back into a DOD military simulation training scenario, now you've brought entertainment into a military training product. (Carlton Caldwell, of Lockheed Martin, qtd. in Herz, 1997, p. 204)

This collaboration between Sega and Lockheed Martin in the mid-1990s is just one example of how the video game form has been working its way back into the military-industrial complex from which it had initially emerged: Atari’s *Battlezone* (1980a) is believed to have been the inspiration for DARPA’s SIMNET, an early multi-user vehicle-combat simulator developed for the military (Galloway, 2006; Kline, et al., 2003); id Software’s *Doom II* (GT Interactive, 1995) was modified by the Marines into a team-based infantry combat simulator (Lenoir & Lowood, 2000; R. Stahl, 2010b); and, in 1999, the Institute for Creative Technologies was established at USC with a $45m grant from the Army to develop advanced game-based simulators for the military (Institute for Creative Technologies, 2012; Lenoir & Lowood, 2000; R. Stahl, 2010b).

This historical interest in digital play by the military-industrial complex speaks to the metaphysical shift in our experience of global politics. The advent of photography radically reoriented our relationship to the world through the proliferation of a kind of mapping logic; that is, the extension of the eye via the photographic apparatus rendered experiences of spaces hitherto unmappable—e.g., the battlefield—subject to structuration (Benjamin, 1935/2006; Heidegger, 1938/1977; Virilio, 1984/2009). The photograph imposed a particular perspective upon the experience of reality, and to the extent that this image enabled certain politics over others—via the recognition of certain patterns over others—then a claim was made to the validity of this abstraction of the real over others (Virilio, 1984/2009). And yet, even as photographic technologies were transforming the overall experience of warfare, the age of the
world picture, as Heidegger (1938/1977) called it, was beginning to reach the limits of its political efficacy. That is because if photographic technologies operated as the logical extension of a society intent upon extending the operation of the eye so that “seeing and foreseeing [...] tend to merge” (Virilio, 1984/2009, p. 4), then photographic technologies also reveal the limit of their operation: the object of photography is always that of the past. The advent of digital play, however, overcomes this barrier of time, in that through the abstraction of fundamental rules from the domain of life, the object of play is that of the future—simulation. The proliferation of the combat simulator—which is an outgrowth of digital play—for contemporary warfare, then, speaks to the realization of the desire to see and foresee through an equivocation of virtual-time with real-time; that is, the simulator has ceased to be a facsimile, and instead has come to pervade all aspects of relevant life, so that real-time is evaluated in accordance to the logic of virtual-time. And it is this promise of the virtual—that it might operate effectively in lieu of the real—which was embedded within digital play at the moment of its inception, when Ralph Baer justified his work on the first video game console by noting the equivalence to conventional weapons training exercises (See Halter, 2006, p. 85).

So, though one could understand the divergent, though overlapping, institutional paths of simulator technology and home video game technologies as evidence of two industries serving two very different interests and markets, this is not quite true. Yes, on one hand, the delinking of the video game industry from the military industry in 1972, when Ralph Baer’s “Brown Box” was released as the Magnavox Odyssey, did allow for the design of genres beyond those of explicit military interest, such as platform games such as *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985) and maze games such as *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980). On the other, though operating in separate markets (but not always, as the *Halo* and *Call of Duty* franchises attest), the interests of Empire
continue to be served regardless of whether the audience is military or civilian, even when considering difference in content and genre variation; for it is important to remember that being able to extract three-dimensional situational awareness from a two-dimensional screen is a valuable skill for today’s modern military force (Cantwell, 2009). As Ronald Reagan commented in 1983, while giving a speech at Disney World’s EPCOT Center:

I recently learned something quite interesting about video games. Many young people have developed incredible hand, eye, and brain coordination in playing these games. The Air Force believes these kids will be outstanding pilots should they fly our jets. The computerized radar screen in the cockpit is not unlike the computerized video screen. Watch a 12-year-old take evasive action and score multiple hits while playing “Space Invaders,” and you will appreciate the skills of tomorrow’s pilot. (Reagan, 1983)

Though one might smile at the presumed inanity of comparing the mastery of *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978) to possessing the skillset necessary for taking evasive maneuvers with a fighter jet, President Reagan’s fundamental premise is that a relative equivalency between the screens’ of modern military technology and video game technology exists, and that familiarity with one is necessarily familiarity with the other: even in our leisure, we train ourselves for the war of the future—this was the source of Reagan’s pride. And it is here, then, where the video game industry carries on the unwanted legacy of William Higinbotham, the military scientist credited with creating the first video game with the intent of it serving as a friendly counterpart to the otherwise uninviting military-industrial technology (Halter, 2006; Kline, et al., 2003). The invitation of training for the war of the future-present has become ubiquitous, and many have embraced it; for many, war has come to serve as a whole way of life: at one point, “earning virtual combat medals” in *Halo 3* (Microsoft, 2007) was the most popular activity for off-duty soldiers (McGonigal, 2011, p. 2).

Indeed, in 2010, the franchise for which the rest of this chapter will be concerned, the *Call of Duty* series became the best-selling third-party video game of all time (Activision-Blizzard, 2010); and, just one year later, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* was released to the
biggest entertainment launch, regardless of medium, with more than $400m (6.5m units) sold in the United States and Britain alone in the first 24-hours of its release—which has meant that for the past three-years, the Call of Duty franchise had released the bestselling video game of the year, with Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (Activision, 2009a) and Call of Duty: Black Ops (Activision, 2010a) generating day-one-sales of $310m and $360m respectively (Activision-Blizzard, 2011a; Richmond, 2011). As Activision’s VP of Digital Sales, Jamie Berger, argued, “[COD] is not even a game any more, it’s a lifestyle. No different from being a golfer or a marathon runner, there are people out there who are Call of Duty players” (qtd. in Edge, 2011a, p. 14). This is not mere public relations hyperbole, as four million players registered for the free Call of Duty: Elite social networking and stat tracking service within six days of the service coming online; and one million of those users paid a $49.99 annual subscription fee (making the Elite service one of the ten best video game launches of the year, for the video game retailer GameStop, on its own terms [Grant, 2011]) for the privilege of receiving “expert-analysis of weapons [and] maps,” and more (Activision, 2011a; Mitchell, 2011; Schreier, 2011)—an equivocation of the mission briefings the military provides for its respective operations, except here, the virtual soldier pays for this pleasure.

Why We Fight: From Medal of Honor to the Call of Duty

In late-1997, during the post-production period for Saving Private Ryan (1998), Steven Spielberg met with DreamWorks Interactive regarding his desire to create a video game, which would become Medal of Honor (Electronic Arts, 1999b), so as to share his passion for World War II with younger audiences in the medium of their generation (Edge, 2011b). The military games that had existed up to this point treated historical events as mere set-pieces, with little explanation as to why such a conflict had manifest, or even what were the significances of
partaking in the conflict. For instance, the opening sequence of an early World War II themed game, *Castle Wolfenstein* (Muse Software, 1981), offers this scenario:

> The Nazis brought you here to get information out of you before they kill you. [...]. The battle plans for Operation Rheingold are hidden somewhere in the castle. I’m sure you know what it would mean to the Allied high command if we could [escape and] get our hands on those…

The “I’m sure you know what it would mean” operates as the extent of the historical logic of this history lesson, in that, the player knows that: sure, Nazis are bad, Operation Rheingold is a Nazi operation, thus we must stop Operation Rheingold, whatever that is. id Software’s take at the *Wolfenstein* universe fared no better in terms of historiographical richness, in that *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) replaces Operation Rheingold with Operation Eisenfaust, a Nazi secret weapon consisting of…, undead mutants—because regular mutants would not be enough.

So, there again, was Steven Spielberg expressing his desire to inject historical realism into a medium that has often been critiqued as being devoid of any, with the hope of sharing his passion of World War II with younger audiences. The meeting would give birth to a project designed to translate the emotional veracity of *Saving Private Ryan*’s historiographical style into the video game form (Edge, 2011b). The aesthetics of *Saving Private Ryan*’s historiographical style, which can be thought of as a hyper-real, romantic emplotment, that is the absolute beauty of the struggle (See: R. Stahl, 2010b; White, 1973), lent itself well to the procedural rhetoric of a first-person shooter, and so it was that, with Spielberg’s blessing, this genre would be granted legitimate access to claims of historical realism. Like *Saving Private Ryan*, this mode of historical realism would come to be defined in terms of affect, feeling “what it was like,” as opposed to understanding the politics of history, in this case, the politics of why we fight (R. Stahl, 2010b, p. 43). In this sense, if the *Civilization* franchise and others like it can be understood as a procedural rhetoric of conflict, that is, an interactive demonstration of the “clash of civilizations” thesis (see Chapter Three), then the first-person shooter, after Spielberg, takes
this foundation for granted, and instead offers a complimentary procedural rhetoric of affect, that is, an interactive demonstration of, what Roger Stahl (2010b) calls, the “support-the-troops rhetoric” (p. 43); and to the extent that both genres perform their rhetorical functions, then, as I argue, the representation of imperial anxiety and desire is saturated throughout the experience of gameplay.

From the start, everything about Spielberg’s project, aptly titled *Medal of Honor* (Electronic Arts, 1999b), was geared towards the “support-the-troops rhetoric.” An early trailer for the game, included fittingly with the video game version of *Small Soldiers* (Electronic Arts, 1998), offers images of the game accompanied by a rousing score, with the following captions boldly superimposed over the footage:

- AN ADVENTURE THROUGH THE HEART OF OUR MOST DANGEROUS CONFLICT AND HISTORY’S GREATEST TRIUMPH
- WWII EUROPE RECREATED
- A 3D WORLD TO EXPLORE
- EXPLOSIVE COMBAT
- PREPARE FOR YOUR FINEST HOUR

By virtually inserting the player directly into the “heart of our most dangerous conflict and history’s greatest triumph,” Spielberg sought to give the player “genuine insight into the history behind WWII” (Edge, 2011b, p. 145). This genuine insight was predicated on the prospect of the game reproducing a rough approximation of the essence of the military experience, which according to the marketing material can be reduced to world exploration and explosive combat; and though this rhetoric of authenticity, in terms of world exploration and explosive combat, is not unique to the video game industry, combined with the illusion of the avatar, the extension of the individual into virtual space, the difference is that the video game player is promised not the subject position of witness, as in a documentary, but rather that of the participant: prepare for
your finest hour. Hence, one is compelled to support the troops because of the illusion of having undergone a rough approximation of the military experience.

Though warfare had long since come to operate through the virtual—that is, contemporary warfare is predicated on new media technologies that substantially reconfigure the experience of warfare—Spielberg’s *Medal of Honor* raised the stakes of this arrangement. Prior to *Medal of Honor*, it was relatively acceptable (beyond criticism of the effects of violent games) for video games to depict recent military conflict. For instance, speaking of Electronic Arts’ *Desert Strike: Return to the Gulf* (1992), William Burrill (1992) satirically wrote:

> Some may question the wisdom of capitalizing on the ugliness that was the Gulf war. But this was, after all, the conflict labeled “the Nintendo War,” for its stream of footage of whizzing smart bombs and skidding Scuds, and choppers buzzing the scorched Earth. *It was just like a video game. And now it is a video game.* (Italics added for emphasis)

On a less satirical note, though William Schiffmann begrudgingly acknowledged that *Desert Strike* was “yes, […] another ‘war is hell’ game cart,” he enthusiastically concluded, “But what a cart! […] This is a game with no drawbacks, except that it’s so tough. The graphics are solid, control is excellent and the challenge is awesome.” Even Burrill (1992) ultimately endorsed the game, writing, “Bottom line: if you like shooters and are not turned off by a blatant attempt to cash in on real life misery, you’ll like *Desert Strike*. I did.” Electronic Arts’ *Desert Strike* appeared in February 1992, one year after the actual Persian Gulf War concluded, and thus resonated with the early period of the militainment industry (See R. Stahl, 2010b).

Cultural artifacts, like *Desert Strike*, associated with this period, sought merely to extend the experience of consumption—or cash in on this system—that had been established with the Persian Gulf War. And though the argument could be made, at no point did these cultural artifacts promise to offer an equivalent experience to that which was represented—that was best left as implied. For the acknowledgement of the equivocation of play to warfare would mean that
the metaphorical power of play would be lost: “the real is, in fact, the last resource of metaphor, but that resource must not be called on […] on pain of losing its metaphorical power, its power of illusion (Baudrillard, 1994a). At this point in time, in the early 1990s, video games were still deemed as child’s play (D. Williams, 2003), and hence were not yet ready to reveal the existence of their adult content: generic skills, such as improved hand, eye, and brain coordination were acceptable, as evidenced by President Reagan’s EPCOT Center’s speech; but the world was not yet ready for the possibility that Orson Scott Card’s (1977/1991) Ender’s Game, or even Barry Levinson’s (1992) Toys, might be on the verge of actualization—and hence, the metaphor that was play could not yet be revealed as real.

Medal of Honor made explicit what had previously been implicit, however, and, as such, had to carry out the political legwork of dealing with this cultural shock stemming from this reconfiguration of the real. The game’s title, Medal of Honor, and tagline for the subsequent games in the franchise, “You Don’t Play, You Volunteer” (See: Electronic Arts, 2002b, 2003b), promised the player the opportunity to “fight WWII for the First Time” (See Figures 4.10-11). This rhetoric was interpreted by some players as meaning: “This is the game […] for the person who wishes they could have fought but was born 60 years too late” (Feddock, 2006). This desire for the erasure of time and space, the belief that the virtual could replicate the experiences of the real, was not embraced by all, however. Just weeks before Medal of Honor was to be released, Paul Bucha, president of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, argued to Spielberg: “When it comes to the Medal of Honor, it’s a serious and sacred thing, you don’t turn it into a videogame. It’s an awful thing to do” (Edge, 2011b, p. 145). The exception taken by Bucha resonated with the ongoing cultural transformation currently taking place in the U.S. military’s transition from a “manned” to “unmanned” force. Like the contemporary Air Force pilots’
objections to granting drone operators the title of “pilot” (Cantwell, 2009, p. 75), Bucha’s primary critique was that by promising an equivocation of experience between play and combat, Spielberg was “dishonouring the Medal of Honor. [And thus] Please change the name of the game” (Edge, 2011b, p. 146). In essence, it was not the content of the game that was objectionable, but rather the acknowledgement of the permeability between play and combat, and thus, the equivocation between the two—much like that of the objection by military pilots of calling drone operators “pilots.”
Figure 4.11. Back cover of *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (Electronic Arts, 2002b).
Much like the hierarchy established between military pilots and drone operators, with drone operators conceived as consisting of low-tier, support personnel, Spielberg and company resolved the tension with Paul Bucha and other military veterans by conceiving of the video game as virtual museum. Throughout the *Medal of Honor* experience, players would be exposed to historical footage that functioned simultaneously to serve not just to defer virtual combat to physical combat, but also to remind the player that such a distinction even existed in the first place. At the same time that drone operators were learning to extract three-dimensional combat information from the two-dimensional screen, military personnel were reminding those extracting this information that “this stuff is real. I’m taking real lives. I’m shooting real weapons. And I have to be really responsible for my actions” (General Jumper, qtd. in Cantwell, 2009, p. 70); the fear was that in extracting three-dimensional information from two-dimensional space, the essence of the life on the other end of the screen would be lost in that translation (Grossman, 1995/2009). Hence, *Medal of Honor* made every attempt to remind the player that though the game was authentic, it was still a game—much like drone operators are constantly reminded that though this is like a game, it is still authentic.

The complicated embrace of and dependency upon the video game industry by the military-industrial complex illustrates the saturation of anxiety and desire in the managing of the borders between the virtual and the real. On one hand, the video game has been a site of extreme productivity for the advancement of military desires: combat simulators, military recruitment boosts, public relations and citizen-soldier training, et cetera. On the other hand, however, the increasing equivocation between play and combat has been a source of anxiety as well: the destabilization of existing military hierarchies due to the increasing virtualization of the military (e.g., Air Force pilots versus drone operators) and an increasing concern of the effect
virtualization is having on the experience of conflict itself. Though these two anxieties would seem to be dissimilar, they are in fact closely related: for though digital technologies are capable of placing combatants in ever closer proximity, the effect of the interface is that of an often unbridgeable distance, like that of the voyeur watching the undressing of death without fear of being exposed as such.

For a time, the video game and military industry worked in conjunction so as to assure themselves and the public that war was real and not a video game. Today, however, this is no longer the case, as evidenced by the U.S. Air Force’s “It’s not science fiction, it’s what we do every day” campaign (See Figures 4.8-9). Video games themselves, have abandoned the deferral to the real as well, and have themselves taken part in the economy of military speculation: in 2007, Medal of Honor: Airborne abandoned the tagline of “you don’t play, you volunteer,” in favor of that of “the first step is everything” (Electronic Arts, 2007); and, with the portrayal of modern warfare as the most compelling narrative thread for contemporary military games, the franchise rebooted itself in 2010 and abandoned its representation of the past in favor of that of the present-day Tier One soldier:

The war wages on. We have dealt the enemy many crushing blows. We have exposed their positions and driven them back. But they have endured. They have adapted. And they are not as weak as we once thought. War requires the sledgehammer, but will be decided with the scalpel. A different breed of warrior is required. We are experts in the application of violence. We possess the mindset and will to do what is necessary. We are tier one. ([emphasis added] Electronic Arts, 2010d; See Figure 4.12)

Indeed the transition to modern warfare in contemporary video games represents the increasingly tenuous hold the real has on contemporary experiences of combat—for though these games claim the moniker of modern warfare, the conflict is that of the near-future conflict. Hence, in the shift from Electronic Arts’ Medal of Honor (1999b) to Medal of Honor (2010c) we can witness the transition of the digital lens in midflight: from once having followed the trajectory of the bullet (in 1999), the virtual conflict now widely precedes the actual conflict—as the U.S.
military continues to be embroiled in an international War on Terror, the U.S. public had just spent the past five-years playing out the conclusion of World War III via Activision’s *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* Franchise (2007a, 2009a, 2011b). Indeed, when witnessing the climax of a near-future, plausible military conflict is documented as the biggest entertainment launch ever (Activision-Blizzard, 2011a; Richmond, 2011), then it is time that we follow the aim of the video game gaze, and trace the trajectory of the projectile shot in advance.

**Call of Duty: Modern Warfare and the Ballistics of Anxiety and Desire**

Released on November 5th, 2007, Activision’s *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007a) was not the first video game to take up the subject matter of modern warfare—as *WarGames* (Coleco, 1984), based upon the 1983 MGM movie of the same name, may have been the first—but the absolute success in the franchise’s shift from “retelling some of the greatest battles in World War
II” was not just a “gamble [that] paid off” (Goldstein, 2007), but rather accurately recognized the inability for World War II to continue to provide a compelling historical resource for the public’s understanding of post-9/11 global conflict. Electronic Arts’ Battlefield 2 (Electronic Arts, 2005) and others would also make this transition to modern warfare a few years prior to Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (2007), but for a time the past and near-future were held in tension as to which history offered the more plausible means for making sense of the present: in 2003, Medal of Honor: Rising Sun sold more than 4m units after just two-months on the market (Dunham, 2004); whereas in 2005 Battlefield 2 had just sold 1.2m copies after its first two-months on the market (IGN.com, 2005). As time went on, however, video game companies found the market for historical war games reaching saturation, at the same time that modern warfare themed games were showing significant market potential: in 2006, Call of Duty 3 (2006) sold 1.1m units (Surette, 2006); in 2007, Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare (2007a) sold 2.1m units (Thorsen, 2007); in 2008, Call of Duty: World at War (2008a) sold 2m units (Fritz, 2008); and, in 2009, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (2009a) sold 4.7m units in just its first 24-hours of release (Cork, 2009). What this sales data documents is that Activision’s modern warfare themed Call of Duty games showed significant, nearly double, growth upon last year’s sales, whereas Call of Duty: World at War, the lone World War II-themed Call of Duty since 2008, was unable to expand upon the existing fan base. Indeed, when it comes to video games more generally, Modern Warfare 1 and Modern Warfare 2, and Call of Duty: Black Ops (which is a postmodern retelling of the Cold War), are the bestselling games of this past generation, at numbers 10, 4, and 2 respectively, despite having only been released during the last three years of the decade (Morris, 2011). Considering that Modern Warfare 3 sold 6.5m units in its first 24-hours of release (Richmond, 2011), and 24.95m units as of this writing (VGChartz, 2012), it would seem,
then, that the modern warfare thread has captured the cultural imaginary of the contemporary
game-playing public; and to the extent that the franchise has become an entertainment
phenomenon in itself, with celebrities such as Kobe Bryant, Jimmie Kimmel, Gary Oldman,
Kiefer Sutherland, and Kevin McKidd participating in the marketing and production of the
series, then the *Call of Duty* franchise carries with it a particular cultural gravity extending
beyond conventional gamers as well. Hence, having captured the anxieties and desires of the
contemporary public’s cultural imaginary, the franchise operates as a worthwhile site in which to
document the ballistics of a futures in action.

For those unfamiliar with the intricacies of the *Call of Duty* franchise, however, the
experience of the series can best be described as a video game version of a Michael Bay film; as
Eric Folliot, senior brand manager for the franchise, describes it:

*Call of Duty* delivers epic scale […] It effectively puts you in the heart of a movie that Michael
Bay directed, and it’s just… explosions everywhere. It’s that experience that really resonates with
people. They love it. That once-in-a-lifetime, you get in there, and you’re like “wow, I can’t
believe I’m doing all this stuff.” So yeah, I think that’s what *Call of Duty* delivers. Epic scale, and
fantastic storytelling. ([italics added] Smith, 2011)

The reference to a Michael Bay film as the aesthetic equivalent of the *Call of Duty* franchise
would appear to be ironic considering the Spielberg lineage of the series: the *Call of Duty*
franchise begun when former members of the development team for Electronic Arts’ *Medal of
Honor: Allied Assault* (Electronic Arts, 2002a) left to establish Infinity Ward, which was
subsequently acquired by Activision (Activision, 2003a, 2004). Electronic Arts had contracted
out the development of *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* to 2015 Inc. due to EA’s in-house *Medal
of Honor* team’s lack of comfort with PC development, as *Allied Assault* was to appear
exclusively on computers (Fahs, 2009b). 2015 Inc. took the spirit of Steven Spielberg’s initial
vision, that of giving the player “genuine insight into the history behind WWII” (Edge, 2011b, p.
144), and injected it with the organic pulse of a world about to tear itself apart. Whereas
Spielberg’s military vision was that of a complicated interplay of voyeuristic respect and revulsion, meant to generate identification with and awe for the soldier capable of withstanding the horrors of conflict (R. Stahl, 2010b). 2015 inc. resolved the tension by removing any semblance of revulsion:

A great deal of effort was paid to making Call of Duty 2 a more believable experience. Once again, believability proves distinct from actual realism, as Call of Duty intentionally diverges from reality in many ways. It isn’t a simulation, but rather a kind of storytelling, conveying the drama and tensions of the battlefield.

[...]

Infinity Ward [hence] made the bold decision to eliminate health packs from [Call of Duty 2]. Instead, they took a page from Halo 2 and introduced an auto-healing system that allowed players to recover health over time, rather than searching for medical supplies. Scavenging the battlefield for magic healing items didn’t lend itself much to realism, so the abstraction seemed like a wash, and it allowed Infinity Ward to put the focus on the combat itself—shooting, finding cover, and tracking enemies—rather than encouraging players to look around. ([italics added] Fahs, 2009b)

So though the aesthetic inspiration of Spielberg and Michael Bay have something in common, in terms of representing war as a “fantastic thrill ride” (R. Stahl, 2010b, p. 43), it does matter whether the support-the-troops rhetoric is couched within the tension of rescuing one’s own soldiers from hell rather than eagerly awaiting the opportunity to join them; for though the first may serve to deflect criticism away from the war, in terms of promoting the circular logic of “the crueler the war, the more necessary it is” to continue the war so as to save those already serving in the war (R. Stahl, 2010b, p. 80), the latter verges on conceiving of warfare as the next big thing:

When asked how Sledgehammer [co-developer of Modern Warfare 3] deal with such a sensitive matter as World War III, [Bret Robins, creative director for MW3] said: ‘You blow up a lot of cities, is what you do. We’re creating a huge, like a summer blockbuster story and experience. You try to go for the biggest and craziest moments and set-pieces and locations you can come up with. You try to do it in a very believable and authentic way, so it feels like this could actually happen.’ ([italics added] Haley, 2011)

Indeed, within the Modern Warfare universe, World War III had to happen in the third installment in the series, because it was the only thing that could top the experience of the first two games in the series: Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare featured the terrorist, Al-Asad, launching a nuclear missile into the midst of a Middle Eastern U.S. military operation “Shock
and Awe,” complete with the next level, “Aftermath,” dedicated to the player-avatar slowly dying from radiation poisoning (see Figure 4.13); and, Call of Duty: Modern 2 had the player witness the invasion and overthrow of Washington, D.C. (see Figure 4.14), complete with a nuclear missile detonating in the stratosphere above the region so as to disable the invading Russian army with an electromagnetic pulse. When war is conceived as an extreme, aesthetic experience, then the only thing left after having blown up much of the United States, is to blow up a lot of other (international) cities, such as London, Paris, and elsewhere (see Figure 4.15).

The application of violence, as represented in the Modern Warfare series, is not merely a series of indiscriminate explosions, however, but rather operates according to a complicated interplay of anxiety and desire: it is no longer an anxiety and desire surrounding what they did to us, but rather what they will do to us—and what we want them to do to us, if only so we can
Figure 4.14. Image from “Whiskey Hotel” level of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*. The White House has been captured by the Russian Army.

Figure 4.15. Image from “Battle of Paris” level of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*. The Eiffel Tower is destroyed during a bombing blitz of Paris as the allied forces attempt to retake the capital back from the Russians.
respond in kind. The *Modern Warfare* franchise is a manifestation of the subject’s desire to witness first hand its own destruction, as proof of the need for revenge; in this case, revenge operates in advance, much like the preemptive strike of the War on Terror. But to the extent that the *Modern Warfare* franchise adequately captures the anxieties and desires of the present, then it is telling that the War on Terror is no longer able to capture the attention of the public as it lacks the firepower necessary to mobilize the masses—for that, we need the political economic might of nation-states. Indeed, though *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* uses the contemporary War on Terror as its narrative starting point, with the terrorist Al-Asad standing in for Osama bin Laden, that military paradigm is quickly pushed aside as being inadequate in satisfying the political anxiety and desire of the hardcore gamer; midway through the *Modern Warfare 1*, we learn that the hunt for Al-Asad, and by extension the Middle Eastern targets of the War on Terror, is merely a proxy battle meant to distract the West from the reemergence of Russian nationalism. The game tells us that Russian bitterness over the conclusion of the Cold War serves as the political economic support for Middle Eastern terrorists. Terrorists, then, are conceived as merely political figures necessary for reinvigorating the cultural might of nationalism; and it is this nationalism, this pride, this inability to recognize our new world order, that serves as the greatest threat to contemporary global order—as well as our greatest opportunity to reassert our rightful place as heirs of this new global order. The *Modern Warfare* franchise, then, positions the political economic power of the nation-state as that which drives the international War on Terror, both in terms of supplying the opposition and fortifying our resolve; for only the nation-state has the infrastructure necessary to carry out mass destruction, in terms of both weaponry and citizenry.
This imagining of the War on Terror as that of a series of covert proxy battles between Russia and the West functions to infuse conceptions of modern warfare as a continuation of Cold War politics, and thus positions U.S. Empire as a necessity. This link to Cold War politics is made explicitly within the game, in that the events of the Modern Warfare series are the direct result of this historical legacy: “Our so-called leaders prostituted us to the West… destroyed our culture… our economies… our honor” (Imran Zakhaev, Russian nationalist and primary antagonist of Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Activision, 2007a). This Cold War logic is extended further in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (Activision, 2009a) in that the manipulation of the Russian state by Vladimir Makarov, the leader of a Russian nationalist terrorist cell, leads to the invasion of the U.S. mainland by Russia; and in a nod to John Milius’s Red Dawn (1984), the invasion begins in a level appropriately entitled “Wolverines!” (Activision, 2009a).

This infusion of Cold War politics into the cultural imaginary of modern warfare is further cemented in Call of Duty: Black Ops—which though a major entry into the Call of Duty franchise, is not thought of as part of the Modern Warfare narrative thread. In other words, whereas Modern Warfare 1, 2, and 3, released in 2007, 2009, and 2011 respectively (Activision, 2007a, 2009a, 2011b) operate as sequels to one another, and thus share storylines and characters, the Black Ops narrative thread is conceived as a unique and separate storyline, with no narrative continuity between it and the Modern Warfare iterations. And yet, Call of Duty: Black Ops undertakes the political legwork of threading together the cultural memories of World War II, the Cold War, and contemporary warfare as well. In essence, the central presence of Viktor Reznov, the Russian World War II hero in Call of Duty: World at War (Activision, 2008a), as fundamentally opposed to the Cold War Russian state, cements the U.S.’s imagining of itself as the legitimate Cold War super power and Communist Russia as its illegitimate counterpart—for
the legitimacy of the Cold War Russian state is opposed by its war heroes. Moreover, the actual conflicts of the Cold War are further reimagined as being less of proxy battles and more as necessary covert operations undertaken (with success) for the sake of U.S. national security; in other words, Vietnam and other Cold War conflicts were never about the mere containment of communism, but rather that of the CIA seeking to prevent Russia from carrying out a biological attack against the United States (Activision, 2010a). Moreover, though the player is ultimately successful in preventing this biological attack from happening, the game concludes much like Phillip Noyce’s *Salt* (2010) with the suggestion that the Russian military was able to successfully embed a significant population of brainwashed sleeper agents within the United States—and that this, not the game’s main narrative of Russia seeking to attack the U.S. with biological weaponry, was Russia’s ultimate military project. And just like the premise of the movie *Salt*, to the extent that these sleeper cells continue to live, unaware of their purpose, within the United States, then the Cold War continues.

This, then, is the modern meaning of the citizen-soldier, as articulated in the *Modern Warfare* franchise: not just objects of military anxiety and desire, in terms of potential targets and agents of public opinion, whose participation is limited to that of being a hostage or voyeur (R. Stahl, 2006, 2010a), but that of the ready at hand organic weaponry of modern warfare. For *Call of Duty* articulates the military demand and public desire to push beyond what Roger Stahl (2010b) calls the “closed, constructed system [of militainment] that channels the civic urge through fantasies of military participation” (p. 47), into an integration with the war machine itself. The *Call of Duty* franchise represents the extension of the barracks beyond the confinement of the military-industrial complex and into living rooms throughout the West; it is a site of biopolitical production wherein the logic of military training becomes synonymous with
popular entertainment—that is, military preparedness takes on a governmental logic, wherein the public is conceived as standing-reserve for the near-future conflict. And with the absolute success of the franchise, who needs a draft, when many are not just ready, but also eager, to answer the Call of Duty?

Conclusion: Fascist Art and the Mobilization of the Masses

The existence of war is beyond question in the Call of Duty franchise—and indeed the demand for ever greater saturation of the conflict has operated as a significant militainment, economic engine for the past five-years. The anxiety and desire surrounding the instability of the present—the demand for revenge against what they did to us, the desire to liberate ourselves from depending upon their resources, et cetera—has reached such a degree that the original theorist of fascist art, Walter Benjamin (1935/2006), would surely be surprised by the extent to which the anxieties of the subject has led to the absolute desire to witness first hand its own destruction, if only to have further justification for revenge. The war of the near-future is driven by the desire for mass destruction so that we can respond in kind with the anxiety of the precision strike; or conversely, this is the anxiety of knowing that one is always within reach of death (due to imprecision on their part) and the desire of believing that one is always legitimately able to respond in kind (due to the surgical strike on our part). In this war of the future in action, one that is playing out as we speak, on the screen, whether of the military or the public, borders are being erased because the threat of violence can no longer be contained due to the politics of the present increasingly depending upon the political force of the body under siege. The anxiety and desire embedded within the body under siege, that is, the subject driven by the vision of mass destruction, has come to operate as a powerful economic engine capable of advancing the political interests of Empire—corporations specializing in military and defense contracting are
heavily compensated by the U.S. Government, with Lockheed Martin ($16b), Northrop Grumman Corp. ($11b), Boeing ($10b), to name a few, rounding out the top eight government contract holders in 2010 (Washington Technology, 2010).

If, however, as Benjamin (1935/2006) noted that in 1935 “war and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system” (p. 34), today, the difference is that in war and war only do various publics come into existence in and of themselves: “[COD] is not even a game any more, it’s a lifestyle. No different from being a golfer or a marathon runner, there are people out there who are Call of Duty players” (Activision's VP of Digital Sales, Jamie Berger, qtd. in Edge, 2011a, p. 14). To be a Call of Duty player means to operate at the forefront of the citizen-solider subject described by Roger Stahl (2010b); but these gamers are not subjects trapped in a “closed, constructed system” lacking “any real role in ‘playing the war,’” as Stahl argues (2010b, p. 47), but rather early anticipations of the subjects of a military futures in action: (1) testing the interfaces, algorithms, and technologies of present and future warfare; (2) embracing the gendered and racialized practices embedded within such subjectivities; and (3) lubricating the transnational political economic infrastructure necessary for the current and ongoing operation of Empire (See Chapter Five). As Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2’s Lt. Gen. Sheppard tells the player at one point: “Get up, Private Allen! Rangers lead the way! Move!” ("Team Player," Activision, 2009a); seeing as how this occurs near the very beginning of the game, this statement can be understood, for our purposes, as “Get up, Noob! Call of Duty players lead the way! Move!” In this regard, the advertising campaign for Modern Warfare 3, appropriately entitled, “The Vet & The Noob,” is
an accurate representation of the subject’s transformation through an engagement with the franchise (See Figures 4.16-18). In the commercial, the Vet, played by Sam Worthington, educates the Noob, Jonah Hill, on the intricacies of modern warfare; and by the end of the commercial, the Noob has found his inner soldier, and Sam Worthington and Jonah Hill thus
walk triumphantly towards the viewer with the words “THERE’S A SOLDIER IN ALL OF US” emblazoned on the screen (See Figure 4.18).

As I write this conclusion, there are 455,703 players engaged in virtual combat online in Modern Warfare 3 and 265,093 in Black Ops on the PlayStation Network alone. Considering that the franchise has sold more units for Microsoft’s Xbox 360 platform (13.07m [Xbox 360] vs. 10.40m [PS3], according to VGChartz, 2012), it is conceivable that over 1.5m individuals are currently engaged in virtual combat online via these two games alone. Indeed, on its very first day of availability, Modern Warfare 3 set an Xbox Live record with 3.3m users online concurrently (Activision-Blizzard, 2011b); with Call of Duty: Black Ops having documented nearly as many simultaneous users on its launch day: 2.6m unique gamers (Activision-Blizzard, 2011b). This does not account for the many others online engaged in virtual combat through America’s Army (United States Army, 2009), Battlefield 3 (Electronic Arts, 2011a), Medal of Honor (Electronic Arts, 2010c), or the many other popular military-themed video games.
Considering the vast convergence between the interface of various military systems and the reproduction of these systems in video games, and the value of being able to extract three-dimensional situational awareness from the two-dimensional screen, it would appear that the production of the soldier for tomorrow begins here. This, then, is the logic of Modern Warfare: the production of the citizen-soldier in all of us.

Notes:

xxxvii That Kobe Bryant bore the brunt of the criticism, as opposed to the networks that chose to air the commercial, TBWA/Chiat/Day, the advertising agency behind the spot, Activision-Blizzard, the company for which the advertisement was promoting, or even Jimmy Kimmel (who held as much, if not more, screen-time than Bryant), suggests that this attention was due to more than the “imposture of immediacy” effect of visual media—that is, the mistake of confusing the “optical illusion not just with the illusion of life but with the illusion of survival [as well]” (Virilio, 1984/1989, p. 39). Rather, as Michael Silver (2007) has argued, in the case of Michael Vick, the reception of these images, and subsequent criticism that they receive, circulate within a racialized history and space. In other words, Kobe Bryant, and not Jimmy Kimmel, bore the brunt of the criticism for this advertising campaign because Bryant’s racialized body is more capable of carrying the cultural anxiety of urban violence (e.g., the illusion of survival) than Kimmel’s sanitized body.

xxxviii Giorgio Agamben (2004/2008) has argued that the politics of 9/11 have made it so that the state of exception is no longer exceptional. As Rajeswari Rajan (2008) notes, however, this conception of exception is not necessarily exceptional to the post-9/11 moment, as non-White populations have long been subjected to exceptional treatment. What is unique to this moment, then, is that the post-9/11 moment marks the reinvigoration of imperialist practices under the auspice of nation-building, citizen-subject formation. This new post-colonial, citizen-subject being formed, then, is an impossible being whose legitimacy is always under question, and hence always necessitated surveillance; this is what Rajan (2008) means when she writes that the present moment represents the convergence of Europe’s two atrocious histories: Auschwitz and colonialism. That is, the subject that is always already suspect, whether here or there.

xxxix In addition to the already cited examples of Hurricane Katrina, other examples illustrating the universalization of border politics within the United States include the post-9/11 security measures implemented in airports (See Bearden, 2011), Arizona’s SB 1070 which makes the failure to carry evidence of legal residence a crime (See Archibold, 2010), the militarization of local police forces (Becker & Shulz, 2011; See also Howell, 2011), and the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (Gould-Wartofsky, 2012).

xiv Cinematic examples of course exist of photographic speculation of the future; however, it is at this point when the utility of photographic technologies begins to decline, in that all that photography can offer is speculation regarding a general trend embedded in the past (See Virilio, 1984/2009). In contrast, digital play can simulate alternative scenarios of the past, present, and future through the manipulation of these general trends and/or constructions of alternative rule sets.

xli That Steven Spielberg’s interest in the video game industry has come to serve as a sign of the legitimation of digital play is fascinating, for Spielberg has been critiqued promoting a romantic, heroic conception of the past that obscures as much as it reveals. In essence, that the legitimacy of the video game’s ability to engage with historical issues should be contingent upon the blessing of the film industry as opposed to the literary tradition, journalism, or even historians, illustrates which conception of reality the video game industry is seeking.

xlii It is important to note that units sold may not necessarily be the best measure of market saturation comparison between these two games, as Battlefield 2 was only available on PC, whereas Medal of Honor: Rising Sun was available on all three major consoles at the time of its release—thereby suggesting two different, though overlapping markets. That said, the point of this comparison is that during this period, both historical and modern warfare games remained relatively popular amongst various sectors of the public.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE ECOLOGIES OF PLAY: BIOPOLITICS OF ANXIETY AND DESIRE

Though capital is often imagined to be secular in its pursuits, many prominent scholars have argued that the “ethos of the modern bourgeois middle classes” is imbricated with the cultural form of Christianity (Foucault, 1977-78/2003; Weber, 1906/1946, p. 321). Indeed, the protestant ethic of “‘proving’ oneself before God” (Weber, 1906/1946, p. 321) is such a part of the psyche of contemporary capital that roughly three-quarters of those in the United States believe that Benjamin Franklin’s (1736/2012) aphorism “God helps those who help themselves” is Christian doctrine (Krattenmaker, 2007). If Weber (1906/1946) and Foucault (1977-78/2003) undertook the important legwork of linking the formation of contemporary capital to that of the protestant ethic and the Christian pastoral, however, other contemporary cultural theorists have sought to push this analysis further so as to understand the implications of Christianity’s eschatological element on the practices and futures of contemporary cultural politics (Baumgartner, 1999; Burke, 1969; Carey, 2002; Lewis, 2011). That is, if contemporary capital is indebted to the protestant ethic (Weber, 1906/1946), in that one’s bourgeois identity operates as a sign of her public worth (Foucault, 1979/2003), then what are those diabolical signs that are to be sterilized for risk of forfeiting one’s promise of social salvation (Burke, 1970/1989, 1973/1989; O’Leary, 1993)?

Though this question of the end and promise of salvation is neither new nor unique to the history of Christianity, this sense of an imminent ending seems to have pervaded the cultural milieu of this particular historical moment as has no other period (Baumgartner, 1999; Carey, 2002; Lewis, 2011). The frequent association of this eschatological structure of feeling with the populations of obscure cults, from the Order of the Solar Temple (1995-1997), Heaven’s Gate
(1997), the followers of Harold Camping (2011), and more recent Mayan Calendar Prophecy, amongst others, however, obscures the larger sense of global anxiety that has pervaded our particular historical moment. As Frederic Baumgartner (1999) and Stephen O’Leary (1997, 1993) have argued, the history of Western secular society has long been intertwined with that of Christian eschatology. This is particularly true for the United States, which has long imagined itself as the manifestation of heaven on earth, and thus always already under siege from the agents of hell and those other sinful individuals who “hate our way of life” (Baumgartner, 1999; O’Leary, 1993). Since the success of the Trinity Nuclear Test on July 16, 1945, moreover, the eschatological frameworks of religious and secular society have overlapped to such an extent that it is no longer possible to truly distinguish between the two:

The atom bomb greatly raised millennial anxiety, both religious and secular, by providing a device through which the end could happen in a manner very close to that described in Revelation. In particular it stimulated nonreligious apocalypticism, since it was not possible for the human race to destroy itself, perhaps even the entire world, by its own agency, without requiring an act of the deity (Baumgartner, 1999, p. 213)

The advent of the bomb made it possible to imagine the absolute destruction of the world at the hands of the Antichrist, whether he is motivated by the devil or otherwise.

If the threat of nuclear annihilation served as an important moment in the fusion of religious and secular eschatology, however, the advent of new communication technologies have served to amplify and intensify our sense that global catastrophe is imminent (Carey, 2002; Lewis, 2011). This does not mean that conditions of our existence or fears of our contemporary moment have necessarily worsened—for whom amongst us has the right to evaluate one’s anxiety for life (e.g., the Holocaust) over another (e.g., Rwandan Genocide)—but rather that the circulation and frequency of these moments seem to have accelerated (Lewis, 2011). In just the past decade, for instance, we have witnessed a frenzy of reports suggesting that the end may be near: the Y2K bug (2000); SARS (2002-2003); Bird Flu/H5N1 (2003-2006); Swine Flu/H191
“Super Bugs” (2010-Present); et cetera. This is not to mention concern regarding the global economy, the War on Terror, and other global anxieties that have arisen since the turn of the century. Hence, though anxiety over the present and future may not be new nor unique to our contemporary cultural moment, we ought to be concerned with the question of what exactly is expressed within these anxieties (and desires); that is, “what is it precisely that is ending, and what is beginning” (Carey, 2002, p. 197)?

The general consensus would appear to be that the regime of the nation-state is coming to pass and the era of advanced, transnational capital is coming to fruition (Carey, 2002; Hardt & Negri, 2001; Harvey, 2007; Lewis, 2011; Schiller, 2007). This does not mean that the purpose and political power of the nation-state has come to an end, but rather that the function and efficacy of the nation-state is undergoing reconfiguration as contemporary politics is rapidly being subsumed within globalization processes (Hardt & Negri, 2001). The production of new communication technologies has worked to create “an ever-denser web of exchanges [amongst] civilizations, [so that] local self-sufficiency [is now] impractical and undesirable” (Carey, 2002, p. 234). This increased interdependence of various global economies has placed increased strain and anxiety on monitoring the integrity of global chains of production and consumption, so much so that it is no longer difficult to think of global food shortages and draughts, amongst other catastrophes, on the scale of biblical proportions (Lewis, 2011). The anxieties that are a part of our contemporary historical moment, then, speak to the sense that our global ecologies—political, economic, as well as environmental—are in the midst of dramatic and traumatic reconfiguration.

Considering that the experience of contemporary capital is entrenched within Christian eschatology, it is not surprising that a plethora of cultural artifacts have emerged for the thinking
through of this sense of an imminent global crisis. Examples include: films, such as *Outbreak* (Petersen, 1995), *Armageddon* (Bay, 1998), *Deep Impact* (Leer, 1998), *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2004), and *2012* (Emmerich, 2009); television programs, such as *Perfect Disaster* (G. Edwards, 2006), *Mega Disasters* (Sharp, 2006-2008), *It Could Happen Tomorrow* (Gidez, 2006-2007), and *Nostradamus Effect* (Ellis & Monahan, 2009); Video games, such as *Metal Gear Solid* (Konami, 2004, 1998, 2001, 2008), *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Activision, 2007a, 2009a, 2011b), and *Fallout* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008, 2010; Interplay Entertainment, 1997, 1998); et cetera. Indeed, regarding the latter medium, it would seem as though the video game may be the eschatological medium par excellence; as the IGN PlayStation Team (2008) humorously noted:

The world has some serious issues. After our incredibly accurate scientific tests, we’ve concluded that 99.987 percent of games made for all platforms involve—in some way or another—the end of the world. This plot device […] clearly stands out as the most overused in the business.

Many of the most cherished and iconic franchises in the industry, in addition to those listed above, from *Mass Effect* (Electronic Arts, 2008c, 2010b, 2012a), *Final Fantasy* (Square, 1994, 1997, 2001; Square Enix, 2009), and *Halo* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2009, 2010), amongst others, begin with the premise that the world as we know it has ended or will soon be ending—if we do nothing to prevent it, of course. This general fixation on the end by gaming culture is not surprising considering the video games emergence from and continued engagement with the military-industrial complex.

And yet, video games, and by extension other media technologies, are not merely sites for thinking through the eschatological feeling of this contemporary moment, however, but are rather imbricated within the complex production and consumption of anxiety (and desire) for the end itself. To the extent that new media technologies are advanced as technologies of utopian possibility, then the construction of our heaven on earth is contingent upon mobilization of
particular economic, environmental, and cultural logics. By this, I mean that the instantiation of new media technologies, in terms of both infrastructure and contents, are attempts to bring about and legitimate a particular configuration of Utopian imagining, and that these actions cut across economic, environmental, and cultural concerns: economic circuits of production and consumption are reconfigured in accordance to the logic of new information and communication technologies (Carey, 1983/2009; Harvey, 1990; R. Williams, 1974/2005); environments and populations have been massively transformed in the search of the raw materials (both in terms of components and labor) needed for the manufacturing of contemporary media technologies (Domoney, et al., 2011; Dyer-Witheford, 2010; GlobalWitness, 2012); and, representation itself is never merely about representation, but always embedded within questions of the right to life and death (Hall, 1992/2001; Lynch, 1998; Ono, 2009b). In sum, when one speaks of the media, one is referencing a complex assemblage of political, economic, environmental, and cultural ecologies. And again, gaming practices are deeply implicated in the formation of this contemporary global ecology and the complex interplay of anxiety and desire that operate within it.

So though gaming is not the only technology operating within this larger global ecology, it is, I have argued, an important site which must not be overlooked when considering the contemporary production and consumption of anxiety and desire. And as part of this larger global ecology, one must conceive of digital play as extending beyond the confines of conventional gaming, for video games have long served as an important site of new media innovation, with implications for the functioning of contemporary capital and military practices. Apple, for instance, recently released its list of all-time top paid and free apps, and digital games, notably, accounted for 14 and 8 of the top-15 paid apps for the iPhone and iPad respectively.
(Viticci, 2012)—and thus a notable chunk of the 25 billion apps that have been downloaded since the official opening of Apple’s App Store in 2008. Moreover, the U.S. military has taken an increased interest in gaming technologies, as evidenced by the creation of America’s Army (United States Army, 2009), development of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (i.e., drones), and the establishment of USC’s Institute for Creative Technologies, which has sought to create “engaging, memorable and effective interactive media that [will revolutionize] learning in the fields of training, education and beyond” (Institute for Creative Technologies, 2012)—and one only need to glance at the Institute for Creative Technologies’ “projects” webpage to see what this means (See Figure 5.1). If our contemporary moment is indeed defined by a looming sense of the end, then it seems necessary to consider the role of gaming in the articulation of this global eschatology.

![Figure 5.1. Projects Webpage for the Institute for Creative Technologies at the University of Southern California.](image-url)
To this end, this chapter takes seriously the role of the video game in the production and consumption of anxiety and desire in the contemporary moment, both in terms of gaming’s material and cultural affects. To undertake this analysis, I organize this chapter as follows: first, I discuss the video games industry’s ecological affect upon the environment and various populations; second, I look into the history of the Resident Evil series (Capcom, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000/2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2005a, 2009) as an exemplary artifact of global anxiety, and position it within the outbreak narrative genre; and third, I offer an in-depth analysis of the Resident Evil franchise so as to suggest that the series is indicative of the proliferation of Western racial logics with Japanese characteristics. Though other games could have been selected, most notably the Fallout series (Bethesda Softworks, 2008, 2010; Interplay Entertainment, 1997, 1998; Micro Forté, 2001), Resident Evil was selected for it engages with the complex circuits of the global production and consumption of anxiety more thoroughly than perhaps any other gaming franchise—further justification for this selection will be provided in the second section of this chapter. Regardless of the franchise selected for analysis, however, my central argument is that contemporary gaming operates as an important site wherein the larger global ecology, in terms of environments, economies, populations, and politics, with its subsequent anxieties and desires, is being transformed.

Ecologies of Exception and Exemption

Jeff Lewis (2011) argues that humanity has long struggled with the entanglement of anxiety and desire. Beneath every act of satisfaction is the knowledge that this particular instance of fulfillment is contingent upon the selfsame extinguishment of that very source of pleasure (Lewis, 2011). And even when a particular act of pleasure is not directly threatened by the fear
of an ending—as when engaging with a non-consumable good (e.g., digital media)—all pleasure carries with it the threat of its excess, and the displeasure that follows (Gunn & Hall, 2008). Societies have historically responded to this tension of pleasure and displeasure through the production of cultural codes meant to warn against the excesses of over- and/or premature-consumption (Lewis, 2011). One only need think of the various rating systems regulating the many media systems in operation today—e.g., the Motion Picture Association of America, Entertainment Software Rating Board, et cetera—for examples of the continued prevalence, and institutionalization of these cultural codes. The production of these cultural codes, however, are not innocent in their conception of legitimate pleasure, but rather work to produce particular subjects of pleasure and displeasure. As Foucault (1975/1995, 1978/1990) has shown with the prison and history of sexuality, discourses of morality function to produce subjects worthy of life (i.e., pleasure) and others worthy of carrying the burden of death (i.e., displeasure). The distinction between the two, however, is not one of repression, as in do not do that for risk of death (e.g., punishment) but rather one of biopolitics, in that someone must be condemned to do that so we can experience pleasure (Foucault, 1975/1995, 1978/1990).

Though Foucault (1961/2006, 1963/1994, 1975/1995, 1978/1990) focused on the production of various subjectivities within the confines of the nation-state, the advent of contemporary capital and new communication technologies requires that we analyze the circulation of anxiety and desire—and subsequent production of the subjects legitimated as worthy of pleasure or displeasure—from a global vantage point. And though Foucault’s (1961/2006, 1963/1994, 1975/1995, 1978/1990) analyses have offered significant insight into the mechanisms involved in the production of various subjectivities, his focus on the nation-state obscures how the production of these subjectivities were already contingent upon the circulation
of pleasure and displeasure on the global scale even during his privileged period of analysis (See: Lewis, 2011; Said, 1993). Hence, in addition to the national prisons, schools, hospitals, and various other sites of contemporary subject formation (Foucault, 1961/2006, 1963/1994, 1975/1995, 1978/1990), the history of capital can more generally be understood as the production of global ecologies of exception and exemption. By global ecologies of exception and exemption, I mean that particular environments and populations are deemed exceptional, and thus worthy of pleasure, while other environments and populations are deemed exempt, that is, functionally excluded from global concern and thus recipients of displeasure. These ecologies are produced through what David Harvey (2003) terms as the process of “accumulation by dispossession.” That is, the enactment of particular economic policies, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and China’s Special Economic Zones, demarcate particular regions and populations as beneficiaries of and others as subordinates to global capital.

The video game industry has long been implicated as an active and important player in the production of these ecologies of exception and exemption. Though Apple has been receiving a significant amount of criticism—and rightfully so—for its association with the appalling labor conditions at Foxconn’s manufacturing plants in Shenzhen and Chengdu, China (Fisher, 2012; Palis, 2012), it was Microsoft’s deal to manufacture its Xbox gaming consoles with Flextronics Inc. that was thought to be the most significant contract for the electronics manufacturing services industry at the very moment when these manufacturing companies were transforming into huge global corporations (See Markoff, 2001). Though at the time of the contract signing Microsoft’s arrangement with Flextronics did not yet compare to the accounts held with Motorola or Ericsson, valued at $4b and $5b per year respectively, the deal did result in the construction of two new factories in Guadalajara, Mexico and Tab, Hungary, with the capacity
for producing roughly two million Xbox consoles in just their first six-months of operation (Markoff, 2001; MTI Econews, 2000). Hence, the contract was highly valued, even when compared to those of Motorola or Ericsson, because as Michael Marks, CEO of Flextronics at the time, noted: “A billion dollars here and a billion dollars there, and pretty soon you’re talking about a fairly large business” (qtd. in Markoff, 2001). Indeed, the economic scale of these transactions are enough to reconfigure global economies; it was believed, for instance, that the economic impact of the Hungarian Flextronics Factory alone would account for 6-7% of Hungary’s GDP in 2002, or roughly USD $3b (MTI Econews, 2000).

Though the procurement of one of these facilities would appear to be an economic boon, especially for impoverished national economies, obtainment is contingent upon a population’s ability and willingness to perform a neoliberal subjectivity. When Flextronics first established its manufacturing plant in Hungary in 1993, for instance, workers initially rejected the company’s policy of performance-linked pay (Wilson, 2001a). The employees had mistakenly believed that the presence of an international electronics manufacturing plant meant that the nation’s global status was in-line with that of Western Europe, when instead Flextronics saw them as comparable to “low-cost, high-tech Asia” (Wilson, 2001a). The presence of Flextronics, and by extension transnational capital, then, is not the production of higher standards of living, per se, but rather a sign that one’s population is believed to be malleable enough to extract the greatest amount of value for the least amount of capital. Indeed, Flextronics’ strategy for producing the neoliberal subjectivities necessary for maximum value extraction in Eastern Europe was to bypass communist-era workers—who may have seen themselves as citizens first and laborers second—in favor of hiring young people “who weren’t embedded in the old system” (Wilson, 2001a). For populations unable or unwilling to perform these neoliberal subjectivities, the
response by transnational capital has been to demonize these economies as relatively unimportant participants in the global flow of consumption and production:

In the Czech Republic they didn’t know about global competitiveness […]. We told them the competition was in Asia, and they said don’t compare us with Taiwan—we don’t make plastic flowers. That’s how far behind the times they were. (Humphrey Porter, President of Flextronics’ Eastern European Branch, qtd. in Wilson, 2001b)

Due to this refusal to reimagine themselves as a third-world nation, the Czech Republic lost out on any significant investment from Flextronics (Wilson, 2001b). However, considering that within a year, Flextronics would move its Xbox line from Hungary to Doumen, China, in favor of exploiting cheaper labor markets (Landler, 2004), it would seem as though the performance of a neoliberal subjectivity is liable to produce ecologies of exception and exemption one way or another; for though Hungary’s manufacturing industry was able to initially rebound after the loss of the Xbox line, it was only able to do so by maintaining its status as a low-cost manufacturing base, but this time, for Chinese companies looking to export to the European Union (See Landler, 2004). Hence, to the extent that capital operates through the production of global ecologies of exception and exemption, performing the role of an exceptional or excluded population, whether willingly or otherwise, is likely to keep intact the logics of those ecologies: the uneven distribution of pleasure and displeasure. Nowhere is this perhaps more explicit than that of the uneven distribution of pleasure and displeasure in operation at the outer limits of the circuits of production and consumption within the video game industry.

Unlike the hybrid ecologies of Hungary, Mexico, and China, which as manufacturing ecologies are situated in the middle of global circuits of production and consumption—and thus in the midst of a complex circulation of the uneven distribution of pleasure and displeasure—the Tantalum rich Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) stands at the far end of the extraction of pleasure and accumulation of displeasure. Though the demand for tantalum cannot be pinned
exclusively to the desire for video game devices—as the rare metal is a key material for the production of many electronic devices—the heavy global demand for Sony’s PlayStation 2 was believed to have contributed to the strain on global supply chains, which resulted in the search for new sources of tantalum (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; GlobalWitness, 2012; Hayes & Burge, 2003; Vick, 2001). Though Australia held the largest known tantalum deposits at the time, the DRC proved to be of particular interest due to the presence of an easily exploitable labor force and fairly large, and unclaimed, source of tantalum (Coakley, 2000; Dizolele, 2007; Hayes & Burge, 2003; Montague, 2002). To put this into perspective, during the height of the global surge in demand for new media technologies at the turn of the century, tantalum prices increased from USD $40 per pound to as high as USD $300 per pound (Coakley, 2000), while DRC miners were paid, at most, only as much as USD $10 for a pound of tantalum (Vick, 2001). Likewise, a large amount of tantalum is believed to be traded on unmonitored markets due to the significant amount of theft that occurs at the mines: miners and venders are often at risk of being raided by armed bandits or corrupt soldiers (Hayes & Burge, 2003).

This initial interest of global capital in the DRC motivated thousands of Congolese men to leave less profitable occupations, particularly farming, to take up tantalum mining in the hopes of obtaining better pay (Dizolele, 2007; Hayes & Burge, 2003). This has resulted in the destabilization of the DRC’s overall ecology, both economically and environmentally, as these mining populations have found themselves without an agricultural base from which to obtain food; hence, hunting and foraging—which may be sustainable practices for smaller populations—has resulted in the massive overhunting of wildlife:

The wildlife toll is unknown but it is suspected that all 3,700 elephants and most of the 8,000 eastern lowland gorillas (Grauer’s gorilla) in the [Kahuzi-Biega National Park] have been killed. In the highland area still patrolled by park wardens, all 350 elephants and half of its 258 gorillas are gone. […] miners had been eating elephant gorilla, chimp, buffalo and antelope for a year, but by March 2001 they were eating tortoises, birds and small animals. Previously, hunting trips had
lasted a day, now they lasted a week and often did not catch anything. (Hayes & Burge, 2003, p. 37)

The point of this environmental impact is not that global demand for new media technologies, including gaming, may be leading to the extinction of various species—though this is clearly a concern—but rather that the viability of whole ecologies are being threatened because of this demand. This point is made evident when considering that after tantalum prices dropped due to overproduction, the infrastructure left intact (that is, the assemblage of military personnel assigned to protect the mine and corruption that sprung up around this industry) left the population in desperate need of work. Without a stable agricultural base—which had been decimated to the extent that farming was now considered dangerous due to the threat of being raided by hungry bandits, soldiers, or rebels forces—mining, which continues to present its own dangers, and now only offers less than a $1 pay per day, is believed to be amongst the few viable means of making a living in the DRC (Dizolele, 2007; Domoney, et al., 2011; Hayes & Burge, 2003).

The cultural effect of new media practices, then, cannot be thought apart from the ecological impact the development of these technologies have on various environments and populations. These connections between various ecologies must be kept intact, for otherwise we risk mistaking the only ecology of importance as being that occupied by the end-user; for instance, energy efficient devices are of course important and desirable—particularly as new media technologies become increasingly smaller and mobile—but the value of this feature is complicated if this characteristic is brought about through the exploitation and devastation of other ecologies, which may be the case with energy efficient batteries as “tantalum capacitors support handset miniaturization and long battery life” (Hayes & Burge, 2003, p. 20; See also TIC, 2012). This concern is of increased importance as gaming technologies are becoming
increasingly powerful, smaller, and mobile, thereby increasing or at the very least sustaining the demand for tantalum at the same time that known Australian (21%) deposits are declining—thereby increasing the burden placed on those of frequently less protected ecologies, such as those in parts of Latin America (40%), Southeast Asia (10%), and Central Africa (9%) (See TIC, 2012).

Hence, without even having touched upon the question of electronics disposal—which often involves the shipment of toxic e-waste to dumps around the world, usually in Africa, India, or China (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009)—video games are implicated in the reconfiguration of global ecologies along the lines of exception and exemption. For those who may feel as though I am overstating the case, and that video games constitute a relatively minor role in the grand scheme of new media technologies, we must remember that gaming practices are no longer confined to gaming consoles. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, the logics of digital play have pervaded all aspects of society: from the economy (See Chapter Three) to the military (See Chapter Four), and, as I have been arguing, our conception of ecology as well. Returning to the example at the beginning of this section of Apple and the criticism it has received for its involvement with Foxconn, it would appear that the practice of media convergence would position this controversy as linked to gaming as well: as the App Store download patterns suggest, the iPhone and iPad are as much gaming devices as they are mobile phones and multimedia machines (See: Apple, 2012; Viticci, 2012). This is true of other devices as well, as digital play is often experienced through Droid and other “unconventional” gaming platforms in addition to dedicated gaming consoles, not to mention personal computers—which has long possessed an important and enthusiastic gaming culture. And even for those who imagine themselves to be beyond implication, untouched by gaming culture, free from both the
devices and social groups that have formed around them, the expectations, demands, anxieties and desires of digital play have made it so we all are touched by this ecology. Ecologies of exception and exemption do not require that their subjects embrace or even acknowledge their existence—only that they exist:

“Do you know coltan is highly prized in America and Europe? [That it] is needed for computers and video games […].” “No,” Baruti [a 16-year old miner in the DRC] replies. Their world revolves around the open-pits where they make less than 20 cents a day. (Dizolele, 2007; See also Vick, 2001)

For those who refuse to believe themselves touched by gaming culture, likewise, we could ask:

“Do you know that contemporary new media technologies are frequently driven by digital play?”

“No.” And yet, their world revolves around media technologies imbricated with the political economic and cultural practices of digital play (for example, HDTV and Blu-ray adoption rates were significantly impacted by gaming consoles [PR Newswire, 2008; Smale, 2008]).

Whether these ecologies are recognized as being implicated with the practices of digital play or not, however, it is clear that the contemporary global moment is entrenched with anxiety regarding the future (Baumgartner, 1999; Carey, 2002; Lewis, 2011). Jeff Lewis (2011) has noted that many cultures have historically produced eschatological myths so as to properly navigate these moments of crisis. It would seem to be that today we are in the midst of an upswing regarding the search for secular myths that might translate, compliment, and/or supplement (though not replace) the religious explanations of the past in service of the present; or, as Stephen O’Leary (1993, 1997) has argued, the point is not whether the eschatological narrative is of explicitly religious or secular origin, but rather that they rely upon similar rhetorical structures: the near-future struggle of good versus evil. Though these myths are produced within and circulate through a variety of mediums, from literature to film, if gaming culture is indeed an increasingly important part of our larger global ecology, then it seems as
though we are in need of an analysis of the eschatology of digital play. Though I have touched
upon elements of this logic of the end within the Civilization franchise (See Chapter Three) and
Call of Duty: Modern Warfare series (See Chapter Four), the remainder of this chapter will be
dedicated to an analysis of Resident Evil and its sequels in order to understand how gaming
speaks to the crisis of ecologies itself.

**Playing with the Politics of Biohazard**

In the late 1970s, Susan Sontag (1977/1989) recognized the reemergence and increased cultural
significance of what has come to be called the “outbreak narrative”: the formula of identifying a
looming epidemic, discussing the means by which it will spread, and then advocating for a
noted that particular diseases had a capacity for capturing the cultural imagination of a given
period. These particular afflictions are taken up and invested with more than just the question of
death and dying but rather the legitimacy of one’s right to life (Sontag, 1977/1989). The
investment of a particular disease with the cultural anxieties and desires of a given population
has an effect upon the actual manifestation of the disease, as well, in terms of: how the
dissemination of the “outbreak narrative” promotes or mitigates the stigmatization of “groups,
populations, locales […], behaviors, and lifestyles, and […] change economies,” thereby
influencing “survival rates and contagion routes” (Wald, 2007, p. 3). This is particularly evident
in the historical response to AIDS, in which the homophobic discourse that has surrounded the
transmission of the disease has not only configured the affliction as “punishment for deviant sex”
(Sontag, 1977/1989, p. 151) but has also obscured the effect it has had on other populations
(Wald, 2007), particularly African American women (Randolph, 2011). It seems pertinent,
then, that we look to popular forms of the representation of disease and contagion if we are to
understand the conception of various ecologies of exception and exemption; that is, if we are to understand how certain populations are marked as worthy of life and others to be expendable.

Indeed, since the recognition of Cancer and AIDS as containable, but not necessarily curable, in the 1970s and 1980s respectively, narratives of a coming, catastrophic epidemic have appeared with increasing frequency (Sontag, 1977/1989; Wald, 2007). These afflictions represented an affront to modern medicine’s “central premise […] that all disease can be cured,” and thus turned the attention of epidemiology towards conceiving of infection as a sign of a given population’s immorality and/or incapacity (Sontag, 1977/1989; Wald, 2007). In truth, disease and morality had long been understood in conjunction with one another, as infection was often thought to be a visible sign of one’s affliction with sin: Spanish missionaries, for instance, believed the spread of disease amongst Native Americans was punishment for their paganism (Baumgartner, 1999, p. 122); and, even after epidemiology emerged as a scientific field, religious metaphors have continued to govern our understanding of infectious diseases:

[The] chief source of infection for mankind…. Is mankind itself. Most of the communicable diseases from which men suffer are kept in circulation, like original sin, by the human race. (italics added) Geddes Smith, qtd. in Wald, 2007, p. 21)

Hence, the contemporary representation of infection operates as an important site of eschatological anxiety and desire, whether understood by secular or non-secular populations: in terms of desire, illness is imagined to operate as a potential consequence or punishment for living a risky or sinful lifestyle, and thus of another’s ineptitude and/or guilt; in terms of anxiety, affliction is imagined as the potential threat of tolerating the behavior of risky or immoral populations (Lynch, 1998; Wald, 2007). The combination of this eschatological logic is present in the production of contemporary outbreak narratives, in that “normal” (hence, moral) populations are often represented as under siege from “deviant” (hence, immoral) populations. And yet, though much work has been undertaken on the production and consumption of these
outbreak narratives (Davis, 2002; Humphreys, 2002; Keränen, 2011; Lynch, 1998; Pernick, 2002; Sontag, 1977/1989; Wald, Tomes, & Lynch, 2002; Wald, 2007), the scope of analysis has often remained limited to U.S. cultural practices at the very same moment that global hegemony is undergoing reconfiguration. If we indeed are living in the midst of an epidemic of epidemics (Keränen, 2011), then it seems necessary for us to grasp the operation of this epidemic as it circulates on a global level.

It is for this reason that I believe the Resident Evil franchise to be an artifact particularly worthy of analysis. Resident Evil warrants our attention for a variety of reasons: (1) the franchise emerged in the mid-1990s, at the same time that the outbreak narrative was garnering renewed interest and increased significance regarding the Ebola Virus with books such as Richard Preston’s (1994) The Hot Zone (See: Lynch, 1998; Weldon, 2001); (2) the franchise has been extremely prolific, with over 19 games (if we include ports and remakes, the total jumps to 69 [Capcom, 2011b]), 6 films, a handful of novels and comic books, as well as toys and other cultural products; (3) the franchise is the fusion of transnational cultural anxiety and desire, in terms of being produced by a Japanese game company, Capcom, for the intended consumption by Japanese, U.S., and other international audiences; and, (4) Resident Evil is unique in that it functions as one of the longest lasting outbreak narratives, having existed for over 15 years, pre- and post-9/11. For these reasons, the Resident Evil franchise offers a rich archive for understanding the cultural work of the outbreak narrative at a global level.

As stated, the Resident Evil franchise began at a time when the outbreak narrative was in the midst of resurgence. The maturation of the outbreak narrative, through the epidemiological designation of a Patient Zero and African Origin Theory of AIDS, resulted in a particular entanglement of anxiety and desire that marked certain afflictions as more deserving of attention
than others (Wald, 2007). AIDS captured our cultural attention because it was believed to predominantly infect a derided population, gay men, thereby justifying their being ridiculed, while simultaneously threatening to afflict innocent populations due to contaminated blood transfusions (See the "Burk Family," in Wald, 2007, pp. 246-248) or closeted men who would ‘‘secretly’ sleep with other men’ and then pass the disease to their unknowing family (Randolph, 2011, p. 79). This is not to suggest that the fear of AIDS or any other disease is illegitimate, but rather that the designation of a given affliction as particularly insidious is often imbricated with existent social norms governing guilt and innocence (Humphreys, 2002). In the case of contemporary outbreak narratives, then, the designation of a Patient Zero and African Origin Theory of AIDS granted credence to the conception of the United States as always already under siege from foreign agents (whether microbiological or otherwise). Hence, when the Ebola Virus erupted in Kikwit, Zaire, in 1994, a readymade narrative existed for cultural exploitation: Ebola was of African Origin, and thus particularly insidious, and all that was needed was some future Patient Zero to bring the disease to the United States. The cultural potential of this readymade narrative were such that, at times, the popular fascination with the Ebola Virus ‘‘overshadowed the [United States’] continuing but fatigued fascination with AIDS/HIV’’ (Lynch, 1998, p. 234); and thus, provided a timely reinvigoration of the outbreak narrative. And yet, though the original Resident Evil (Capcom, 1996) clearly benefited from this heightened fascination with infection, the outbreak narrative offered differed significantly from that of other popular sources: science, and not the environment (let alone Africa), was the source of affliction; that difference would no longer exist, however, after 9/11.

The difference of focusing on science as opposed to the environment as the source of catastrophe did exist at the moment when the Resident Evil franchise first began, however.
Though the original *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996) may have benefited from the cultural salience of the outbreak narrative in the United States—selling 2.75m copies (with an additional 1.2m from the 1998 release of the Director's Cut Edition [Capcom, 2011a])—the generic conventions of the game borrowed as much from Japanese Horror as it did Western Epidemiology. As has been noted elsewhere, much of the aesthetic and ludic design borrowed heavily from the French publisher Infrogrames’ (1992) *Alone in the Dark* (Fahs, 2009a), with both games emphasizing obscure (if not infuriating) puzzle designs, control mechanisms, and purposefully disorientating camera angles (See Figures 5.2-3). And yet, though *Resident Evil* shared aesthetic and ludic elements with *Alone in the Dark*, an overemphasis on these Western elements obscures the existence—and significance—of the game’s resonance with that of Japanese post-war horror cinema conventions (See "*Resident Evil* and the Biopolitics of Ecologies of Exception and Exemption” below). This is not to argue that the game is more Japanese than Western, or vice-versa, and that this ought to be recognized, but rather that the *Resident Evil* franchise is a transnational cultural product that operates as an important site for understanding Japanese and U.S. barometers of anxiety and desire. Considering the political weight these two countries have on not just their respective regions, but the globe as well, it seems even more pertinent to keep this artifact’s transnational origins in tension.

If in the 1970s and 80s, Cancer and AIDS epidemiology were reworking the cultural formations of outbreak narratives (Sontag, 1977/1989; Wald, 2007), so too was the economic success of Japan reconfiguring the global understanding of cultural transmission (Iwabuchi, 2002). The parallels between these two historical and global developments ought not to be disregarded, for as Priscilla Wald (2002) argues, “the methods bacteriologists developed to track the spread of contagious disease [have historically] contributed significantly to the new means
Figure 5.2. *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992).

Figure 5.3. *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996).
fashioned by students of culture to study the formation of communities” (p. 655). In other words, just as the United States was formulating a mechanism by which to manage its cultural anxiety regarding the possibility of national contamination from un-American, foreign agents, so too were Japanese cultural producers formulating mechanisms for how to operate on the global market without offending various national anxieties about cultural contamination. The practice of *mukokuseki*, “literally meaning ‘something or someone lacking any nationality,’” was designed to remove Japanese ethnic markers from international cultural products in favor of universal social characteristics; in practice, however, *mukokuseki* tends to privilege characters “modeled on Caucasian types,” thereby suggesting that a “Western-dominated cultural hierarchy governs transnational cultural flows in the world” (Iwabuchi, 2002, pp. 28-29).

Though this attempt at the creation of what Koichi Iwabuchi (2002) calls culturally odorless commodities is not always successful, and has become increasingly conspicuous since the late 1980s, the practice of *mukokuseki* reveals much about the cultural anxieties and desires involved in the production and consumption of transnational artifacts; the following exchange between Scott Jones (a contributor for Crispy Gamer) and Jun Takeuchi (the creative lead for *Resident Evil 5*) regarding the *Resident Evil* franchise is illustrative:

Jones: I always feel with Capcom games that there’s a not-so-subtle subtext of making fun of Americans. Chris Redfield [one of the major protagonists in the *Resident Evil* franchise]; he’s kind of a dickhead.

[...]

Takeuchi: That’s not something we ever really thought about. Now that you say it, I can see where you’re coming from. Chris has been in the series a long time, obviously, and we view him as being a very serious and straight-laced person. He probably isn’t a nice person to be around. He probably isn’t good at dealing with other people because he takes his work so seriously. You can see that in a lot of other [Japanese] games, too. Japanese people tend to like those kinds of characters more than Americans do. (qtd. in Narcisse, 2009b)

Though he is clearly a fan of Capcom and Takeuchi’s work, Jones’ “misrecognition” of Chris Redfield as a parody of American culture illustrates the tenuous nature of transnational cultural production and consumption. For though this sort of “mistake” can occur within any circuit of
production and consumption, whether transnational or otherwise (Hall, 2006), the stakes are significantly higher when communicating across cultures, potentially promoting either: a “positive” “techno-Orientalism-consumer-Occidentalism” symbiosis, in which fans (in this case, U.S. fans) imagine themselves to be “outside ‘the mainstream’ [and therefore culturally savvy] based on their identification with, and of, [an imagined] Japanese cultural identities and aesthetics” (Hills, 2005, p. 171); or a negative, yellow peril discourse in which a presumed Japanese fluency of Western culture is enabling Japan to take over the United States (Ono, 2009a). Hence, the production and consumption of transnational cultural commodities, in this case the Resident Evil franchise, reveals much not only about Japanese understandings of the United States, and by extension global culture, but also how the United States understands itself in relation to Japan and others through the consumption of transnational cultural artifacts. Transnational artifacts, then, operate as an important site for understanding the circuits of global anxiety and desire. In the case of Resident Evil, I argue, the franchise operates as a site for understanding the global politics of biohazards, and thus, the conception of various ecologies as legitimate sites of exception and exemption.

**Resident Evil and the Biopolitics of Ecologies of Exception and Exemption**

In the mid-1990s, the outbreak narrative had captured the cultural imagination of the United States through the circulation of various media: films, such as Outbreak (Petersen, 1995); books, such as The Hot Zone (Preston, 1994); journalistic accounts, such as The Coming Anarchy (Kaplan, 1994); and, even, videogames, with Resident Evil (Capcom, 1996). Unlike the other artifacts, however, the Resident Evil franchise is unique in that not only has the series outlasted the cultural appeal of the others—thereby offering a rich archive for documenting the permutations of the outbreak narrative across the pre- and post-9/11 generations—the games are
not of U.S. origin—thereby offering insight into how the outbreak narrative operates on a
transnational level. Though the franchise has been extremely prolific over the years, the series
can functionally be thought to operate along four separate—but complimentary—lines: the core,
numbered franchise entries (i.e., Resident Evil 0 to Resident Evil 6 [as of yet, unreleased]); the
remastered ports (i.e., Resident Evil 1 [GameCube]); direct ports (e.g., Resident Evil: Code
Veronica X appearing on the Playstation 2 with only minor differences between it and the
original Dreamcast version); and, complimentary, unnumbered entries, whether canonical or
otherwise (e.g., Resident Evil: Revelations [3DS]). Though all four lines of the Resident Evil
franchise are all relevant archives—particularly for understanding the demographic differences
in terms of consumption—for this analysis, I will focus primarily upon the core, numbered and
remastered franchise entries; this is because these entries have the largest popular following, and
are widely understood to be the most significant entries into the franchise. The games are:
Resident Evil 0 (Capcom, 2002a), Resident Evil 1 (Capcom, 1996), Resident Evil 1 [GameCube
Remake] (Capcom, 2002b), Resident Evil 2 (Capcom, 1998), Resident Evil 3: Nemesis
(Capcom, 1999), Resident Evil: Code Veronica X (Capcom, 2000/2001), Resident Evil 4
(Capcom, 2005a), Resident Evil 4 [PS2 Edition] (Capcom, 2005b), and Resident Evil 5 (Capcom,
2009). It is my contention that through an analysis of this archive, we can witness the
transformation of the outbreak narrative in accordance with the epochal break offered by 9/11.
This is not to suggest that 9/11 had a deterministic effect upon the articulation of outbreak
narratives, but rather I seek to extend the argument of Lisa Keränen (2011) that “9/11 […]
provided opportunities for a dramatic and risky expansion of US biodefense” (p. 233). With the
Resident Evil franchise, we are provided insight into how 9/11 provided opportunities for the
legitimation of a dramatic and risky expansion of global ecologies of exception and exemption,
that is, the construction of Empire. To assist in this argument, then, my analysis is broken into three interrelated sections: (1) the anti-capital, pre-9/11 franchise, of Resident Evil 1-3 and Code Veronica X; (2) the revisionist, post-9/11, period of Resident Evil 0-1 [remake]; and, (3), the contemporary counter-terrorism period of Resident Evil 4-5.


This period of the Resident Evil franchise is marked not only by a shared, anti-capital narrative thrust, but also common aesthetic and ludic features. For the sake of the reader, then, I will begin this (and each subsequent section) with an overview of these shared game design elements so as to ground the subsequent analysis. The early games in the Resident Evil franchise were marked by a fixed-perspective, surveillance style camera that conspicuously limited the player’s view of the field (See Figures 5.4-8). This added to the unsettling atmosphere of the games in that this perspective made traversing corners and other blind spots nerve-wracking (for fear of an unseen enemy jumping out at the player); moreover, the perspective made combat difficult, and

Figure 5.4. Resident Evil 1 (Capcom, 1996). Jill (left) with Chris (middle) and Wesker (right)
Figure 5.5. *Resident Evil 2* (Capcom, 1998). Leon (at the top) shooting at zombies.

Figure 5.6. *Resident Evil 3* (Capcom, 1999). Jill (at the top) shooting a zombie, with Carlos (on the right).
combined with the limited access to resources—ammo, health restoration items (e.g., herbs), and even the ability to save (via in-game ink cartridges)—these game design choices effectively encouraged the player to seek flight over fight. Movement was further restrained by the decision to link the avatar to the controller much like that of a radio-controlled car: directional movement is always mapped to the physical perspective of the avatar. In other words, pushing “up” on the control pad will always move the avatar forward in the direction she is facing; and pushing “right,” for example, will likewise always move the avatar towards her right. So in the case of Figure 5.7, for example, if the player were to push “up” and “right,” the avatar (Claire) would walk towards the screen while turning in the direction of the dead zombie—even though these directions, from the perspective of the player, correspond to the opposite directions (due to the fixed camera perspective). These three ludic decisions—of fixed perspective, scarce resources,
and avatar-centric movement—had the effect of making the early Resident Evil games fairly difficult, thereby adding to each game’s atmosphere. To put it more clearly, in most games, death is merely an annoyance typically only requiring either that one restart the level or from the last save point; however, in the early Resident Evil games, one could only save in specially designated locations (rooms with typewriters) and when in possession of ink cartridges (both of which were rare) (See Figure 5.8). This prevented players from constantly saving the game as a means for anticipating future challenges; this also meant that one could find herself playing for hours and unable to save the game for lack of either a nearby or easily accessible typewriter or due to an absence of ink cartridges. Hence, the franchise, famously known for having popularized the survivor-horror genre, embedded these “horror” conventions not just in the narrative, but also in its ludic elements as well: fear stemmed from not just the horror of the story and cinematic design, but also the horror of potentially dying—and thus losing one’s progress—after having played for several hours without saving. These ludic and aesthetic conventions were
established in *Resident Evil 1*, and would be the hallmark of the main series until *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005a).

*Resident Evil 1* did more than just establish the ludic and aesthetic conventions of the early franchise, however; the game also established an explicitly anti-capital narrative for the rest of the series to follow. The game began well-enough like that of any other Western horror:

[Narrated by Protagonist, Chris Redfield]: Alpha Team is flying around the forest zone, situated in northwest Raccoon City, where we’re searching for the helicopter of our compatriots, Bravo Team, who disappeared during the middle of our mission.

[...]

Bizarre murder cases have recently occurred in Raccoon City. There are outlandish reports of families being attacked by a group of about 10 people. Victims were apparently eaten. Bravo Team went to the hideout of the group, and disappeared. (Capcom, 1996)

The back cover of the game’s jewel case reinforces this use of easily recognizable Western horror conventions: “Unstoppable zombies. Monstrous spiders. Mutated snakes and other unknown horrors…” (Capcom, 1996). This has led many commentators to emphasize the influence of Western horror cinema, particularly the films of George Romero (Casamassina, 2002; CVG Staff, 2009; Fahs, 2009a), at the expense of Japan’s horror tradition. And yet, though the game begins in conventional *mukokuseki* style—complete with White Protagonists, settings, and other familiar Western horror conventions—the narrative takes a twist midway through the game that exposes the franchise’s reliance upon Japanese horror conventions. The game, players come to learn, is not about Zombies, but the production of biological weapons by the fictional Umbrella corporation, a large scale pharmaceutical company based in Raccoon City (See Capcom, 1996). It is revealed via in-game dialogue and other plot devices that the pharmaceutical corporation had been conducting experiments in the attempt to manufacturer biological weapons, which appear in *Resident Evil 1* as functional zombies, giant spiders, and other—often previously human—creatures (See Capcom, 1996). Keeping in line with the *daikaiju eiga* (giant monster) and other Japanese horror traditions, the enemy in *Resident Evil 1*
is never really the zombie or these monsters, but rather the scientific-military community run amok (See: Anisfield, 1995; McRoy, 2005b; Napier, 1993).

The monsters, zombies particularly, then, are not necessarily meant to be demonized, but rather sympathized with as potential subjectivities we might ourselves occupy had our luck turned out otherwise; indeed, the game goes through great lengths to provide glimpses of the zombies former humanity:

[From the “Keeper’s Diary” in Resident Evil 1]
May 9, 1998
Played poker tonight with Scott and Alias from Security, and Steve from Research. Steve was the big winner, but I think he was cheating. Scumbag.
[...]
May 11, 1998
At around 5 A.M., Scott woke me up. Scared the shit out of me, too. He was wearing a protective suit. He handed me another one and told me to put it on. Said there’d been an accident in the basement lab.
I just knew something like this would happen. Those bastards in Research never sleep, even on holiday.

[From “Researcher’s Will” in Resident Evil 1]
June 3, 1998
My dearest Alma.
[...]
I sit here trying to think of where to begin, of how to explain in a few simple worlds all that’s happened in my life since we last spoke, and already I fail.
[...]
The entire story would take hours for me to tell you, and time is short, so accept these things as fact: last month there was an accident in the lab and the virus we were studying leaked.
All my colleagues who were infected are dead or dying, and the nature of the disease is such that those still living have lost their senses. This virus robs its victims of their humanity, forcing them in their sickness to seek out and destroy life.
[...]
Alma, I have tried to survive only to see you again. But my efforts have only delayed the inevitable; I am infected, and there is no cure for what will follow—except to end my life before I lose the only that that separates me from them. (Capcom, 1996)

This sympathy is in stark contrast to conventional Western horror films, in that in the United States monstrosity in and of itself is often conveyed as evidence of one’s moral and/or individual failings (Balmain, 2009; Boon, 2007; Dendle, 2007; Wee, 2011). In contrast, monstrosity, in the Japanese horror tradition, is often attempted to be understood, as a means of illustrating not just how someone becomes a monster, but rather why the existence of monsters is punishment
for the failings of society; in other words, in Japanese cinema, the monster exists not as a sign of the individual’s punishment, but rather as a symbol of society’s punishment for producing the monster (Balmain, 2009; McRoy, 2005b; Sharrett, 2005; Wee, 2011). This does not mean that Japanese horror cinema is any more or less progressive or conservative than Western horror cinema, but rather that the onus is on explicitly social—as opposed to interpersonal—institutions, such as the family (e.g., Ju-On: The Grudge [McRoy, 2005a]) or masculinity (e.g., Freeze Me [Lafond, 2005]). The difference, hence, is that in the U.S. horror tradition, one learns of the origins of a monster often for the sake of not becoming one, whereas in the Japanese horror tradition, one learns of the origins of a monster for the sake of not producing one.\textsuperscript{xlvi} In the case of \textit{Resident Evil 1}, then, the game establishes that the pursuits of science for the sake of capital carries with it consequences for society, and that consequence is the potential threat of biological contamination.

Though \textit{Resident Evil 1} (Capcom, 1996) established an element of anti-capitalist critique regarding the collusion between the pharmaceutical industry and the military-industrial complex, however, the game also established a certain logic of exception and exemption that would govern whom was to garner sympathy for biological contamination and whom was to be demonized for being always already contaminated in the first place—and this logic would only become more pronounced as the series progressed. The use of the \textit{mukokuseki} style, with its typical practice of conceiving of a universal subject as being a Western subject (Iwabuchi, 2002; See also Prieler, 2010), tempers \textit{Resident Evil}’s anti-capitalist narrative thread along racial, classed, and gendered lines. So though Japanese horror has a popular tradition of critiquing Western capital, particularly in the \textit{daikaiju} and apocalyptic cinema traditions, which often works to critique Western science in favor of Japanese cultural approaches—which carries its own nationalist
politics (Napier, 1993)—the mukokuseki style collapses this transnational ecology onto an exclusively U.S. national space. In essence, the Raccoon City of Resident Evil 1 is positioned as an innocent, quite town—the traditional, small town “every city”—and, along with its protagonists, who are conceived as universal subjects, configured as legitimate sites and subjects of exception; the world of Resident Evil 1 does articulate an anti-capitalist narrative, but so too does it articulate a framework of whiteness in that the victims are either predominantly White (e.g., Joseph Frost, Richard Aiken, Enrico Marini) or unmarked (and hence, presumed to be White), and likewise so too are the protagonists (e.g., Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine) (Capcom, 1996). This particular articulation of whiteness in relation to the outbreak narrative is significant, for, as Priscilla Wald (2007) argues, the discourse embedded within epidemics carries with it suggestions as to how to understand who suffers from and what must be done in the face of potential epidemic. So though biopolitics operates unevenly and at the transnational level (See “Ecologies of Exception and Exemption” above), the Resident Evil franchise established a particular configuration of the White, gendered, classed, and heterosexual subject as the primary population of concern, as well as primary agents of action.

The linking together of whiteness and the outbreak narrative in Resident Evil, by virtue of the game’s mukokuseki aesthetics, has the effect of foreclosing the possibility of rethinking anti-capitalist politics outside of the selfsame cultural systems that benefit from the existence of contemporary capital—and thus, lays the foundation for revitalizing the series in the service of transnational capital in the post-9/11 franchise. This is made clearer by looking to the generic conventions established in terms of the primary protagonists in Resident Evil 1 and expanded upon throughout the series. Resident Evil 1 establishes the franchise conventions of placing the player within a White, middle-classed (e.g., law enforcement personnel), and gendered,
heterosexual subject position. In the first game, the player is offered the role of either: Chris Redfield, the “tough guy who possesses both a strong mentality and great vitality”; or, Jill Valentine, the female compliment to Redfield, with her “strong moral convictions” and comparatively lower vitality (Capcom, 1996) (See also Figure 5.9). And Resident Evil 2 follows suit by granting the player the roles of either: Leon Kennedy, “an idealistic rookie cop,” who “burns with the need to protect and to serve”; or, Claire Redfield, the “light-hearted, articulate modern woman” (Capcom, 1998) (See also Figure 5.10). The emphasis on this heterosexual pairing offers insight into the ideal gendered subject positions offered by the Resident Evil franchise for thinking through the possibility of an epidemic. If Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine established the convention of White, middle-classed, heterosexual men and women as both victims of and agents against the coming epidemic, then Leon Kennedy and Claire Redfield further cement these ideals as intrinsic within the subjectivity of this particular population; for unlike Chris and Jill, Leon and Claire are not yet matured subjectivities, as it is Leon’s first day on the job and Claire does not yet appear to have an occupation (Capcom, 1998). This has the effect of advocating for a particular biopolitical system that is capable of producing subjectivities

Figure 5.9. In-game profiles for Chris Redfield and Jill Valentine in Resident Evil 1 (Capcom, 1996).
such as Claire, Leon, Chris, and Jill—thereby redeeming the very system that produced the epidemic in the first place, because, as Cheryl Harris (1993) argues, Whiteness cannot be thought apart from the economic system in which it is invested.

In essence, the early *Resident Evil* franchises’ reliance upon two Japanese cultural practices, the *mukokuseki* and *daikaiju eiga* traditions, results in the entanglement of two competing narrative threads, Whiteness and anti-capitalism. On one hand, the early franchise is fairly consistent in its positioning of corporate capital as being antithetical to civil society. In-game documents from these early games are particularly damning of the effect finance capital has on local governments:

[From the “Federal Police Dept. Internal Investigation Report” file in *Resident Evil 2*]
Mr. Irons [chief of Raccoon City Police Dept.] has allegedly received large sums of funds in bribes from Umbrella Inc. over the last 5 years. He was apparently involved in the cover up of the mansion lab case along with several other incidents in which Umbrella appears to have direct involvement. (Capcom, 1998)

[From the “City Guide” file in *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis*]
Thanks to the kind and generous people of Umbrella Inc., this is a peaceful and friendly city. The vast donations from Umbrella Inc. have been used for welfare work, the construction of public utilities, and to help maintain public peace. (Capcom, 1999)

Through the course of these early games, the player learns that the financial donations made by the Umbrella Corporation to Raccoon City resulted in the corruption of local and even state and

![Figure 5.10. Leon Kennedy and Claire Redfield from *Resident Evil 2* (Capcom, 1998).](image)
federal governments. At one point, in *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis*, the protagonist, Jill Valentine, even reprimands another (supporting) character for recklessly seeking out revenge on the zombies:

Jill Valentine: Mikahil, do you have some kind of death wish?
Mikhail Victor: My People… they were wiped out by these monsters! I can’t stop just because I’m wounded!
Jill Valentine: But can’t you see those monsters are also the victims of Umbrella?

And yet, the conflation of whiteness as being equated with the universal, in the tradition of the *mukokuseki* style, lends the early *Resident Evil* franchise a “not in my back yard” narrative thrust. For the game makes it clear that the Umbrella Corporation is not just in the business of pharmaceuticals but also the trafficking (whether sanctioned or not) of biological weaponry (Capcom, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2000/2001). The moral focus of the early franchise, however, is not that of the production of biological weaponry in and of itself, however; it is rather that an outbreak could happen here. What damns the Umbrella Corporation, then, is its failure to adequately respond to the leakage.

If the production of outbreak narratives offer resources for making sense of the anxieties of global epidemics, then, the early narrative thrust of the *Resident Evil* franchise, does position capital as a potential site of outbreak; however, this critique is limited to the instance of crisis, that is, a presumed aberration in capital—when an accidental leak happens. As *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis* makes clear, the outbreak was never meant to happen (Capcom, 1999). But what then of those sites and locations wherein outbreak is supposed to happen? For surely the development of biological weapons carries with it the intention of their usage. This question remains unanswered in the early games of the *Resident Evil* franchise. Though some may argue that one game (or story) cannot touch upon everything, this silence across four games speaks much to the conception of exception and exemption already in operation in the early *Resident Evil* franchise:
outbreaks should not happen here; outbreaks may or may not be happening out there, but we do not care enough to know. The events of 9/11 would compel us to know, however—if not for their sake, than for our own. Hence, the outbreak narrative of *Resident Evil* would need to be updated.


At the turn of the century, Capcom, the developer of the *Resident Evil* franchise, was looking to capitalize upon the outbreak narrative it had produced. The ludic elements that had been the franchise hallmark, however, were beginning to feel dated by both fans and critics alike (Fahs, 2009a; Fielder, 2001; Perry, 2001). Attempts at reinventing the ludic elements of the franchise, however, were met with limited success; *Resident Evil: Survivor* (Capcom, 2000), for instance, which attempted to blend the franchise mythos with the gameplay style of a first-person shooter, was widely panned and poorly received (Fahs, 2009a; Perry, 2000; B. Stahl, 2000). This failure may have been due to the conflicting signals between the ludic and narrative elements, for as Irene Chien (2007) argues, the horror aspect of the “survivor-horror” video game genre may stem from the ability to reproduce anxieties of fragmentation through ludic conventions:

> Rather than gliding into a room towards a cabinet in the corner in a single continuous shot, you first see the doorway to the room from an exterior perspective, then cut to a long shot of one side of the room’s interior as you enter, and then cut to another, medium shot of the cabinet as you approach it […]. As in horror cinema, a sense of paranoia unsettles every step forward. Navigating through the game becomes a highly anxious experience; the gameplay is hesitant rather than fluid and assertive. (p. 65)

Though operating within the same symbolic universe, the outbreak narrative reproduced through these attempts at expanding the *Resident Evil* series failed to capture the sense of dread that made the franchise so compelling and successful. As a result, Capcom opted to refocus the franchise by returning to its roots with the next installment in the series:

> The Biohazard series has slowly moved away from its origin of horror. What our users have supported over the years was this feeling of horror. After much thought, we have decided to return to the beginning and start from one again. (Capcom Press Conference, qtd. in IGN Staff, 2001)
This next installment, then, would be the prequel, *Resident Evil 0* (Capcom, 2002a). Furthermore, as part of a deal entered into with Nintendo, wherein the next few entries into the franchise would appear exclusively on Nintendo’s GameCube, Capcom opted to re-release *Resident Evil 1-3* and *Code Veronica* as both a moneymaking opportunity and as a means for introducing new fans to the *Resident Evil* mythos (IGN Staff, 2001)—as the prior games had all been on other platforms. What is most interesting for our concern, however, is that the re-release of the original games were accompanied by several revisions to the existing *Resident Evil* outbreak narrative. This was, perhaps, of course to be expected with *Resident Evil 0*; however, the most significant revisions were those that accompanied the remake of *Resident Evil 1*.

As argued in the previous section, the early *Resident Evil* franchise’s conception of the Umbrella Corporation fit squarely within the logic of Japan’s *daikaiju eiga* and apocalyptic cinema traditions. In these genres, the pursuit of scientific knowledge in and of itself is always fraught with the possibility of bringing about the destruction of civil society (McRoy, 2005b; Napier, 1993); similar to the romantic writers of the Western literary tradition, the *daikaiju eiga* and Japanese apocalyptic cinema traditions tend to conceive of science as playing god with tools beyond our comprehension. *Resident Evil 1-3* and *Code Veronica* operate within this tradition in that disease spread by the outbreak is consistently noted to be the result of biological engineering; in these early games, the actual origin of the virus (e.g., common cold, smallpox, etc.) is never explored outside of Umbrella’s involvement. This would change, however, with the development of *Resident Evil 0* (Capcom, 2002a) and the remake of *Resident Evil 1* (Capcom, 2002b).

Though the Umbrella Corporation is still held front and center as antithetical to the interests of civil society, the origins of outbreak were rewritten in *Resident Evil 0* and the remake
of *Resident Evil 1*. This was done by placing more emphasis on the natural origins of the virus responsible for the epidemic. Meant to operate as a promotional primer for the upcoming release of *Resident Evil 0* (Fahs, 2009a), the re-release of *Resident Evil 1* included new elements that foreshadowed the narrative revisions that would take place in the prequel. Most significantly, in conjunction with the re-release of *Resident Evil 1*, Capcom produced a promotional document entitled “Wesker’s Report II.” The document was intended to synthesize the outbreak narrative established in the early *Resident Evil* games in preparation for the prequel. Included in the “Wesker’s Report II,” however, is a significant treatise on the uses of the Ebola virus as a biological weapon:

> What if a person infected with the Ebola virus could stand up and walk around? And that infected person would have a disrupted chain of thought, and would infect others that weren’t infected?
> [...] The person would be dead from a human’s point of view, but would still go around as a human bio-weapon spreading the virus around?
> It’s fortunate that the Ebola may have features like this. (Capcom, 2002c)

This conception of the Ebola virus as having the innate potential to transform the infected subject into a “virus bomb” links this revised outbreak narrative with that produced by other cultural artifacts a decade earlier, in the mid-1990s (See Lynch, 1998); for instance, note the parallels in language between the above passage from “Wesker’s Report II” and Richard Preston (1994) *The Hot Zone*:

> He [Monet] doesn’t seem to be fully aware of pain any longer because the blood clots in his brain are cutting off his brain flow. His personality is being wiped away by brain damage. [...] It could be said that the who of Charles Monet has already died, while the what of Charles Monet continues to live . . . Monet has been transformed into a human virus bomb. (qtd. in Lynch, 1998, p. 237)

Like these other outbreak narratives, then, so too does *Resident Evil* introduce the conception of Africa as the home of biological danger (See Lynch, 1998); for even though the Umbrella Corporation is responsible for the production of biological weapons, the “Wesker’s Report II”
makes it clear that within the Resident Evil outbreak narrative these biological weapons may already exist within the natural environment.

If the Resident Evil remake introduced the African Origin Theory of Disease to the Resident Evil franchise, then Resident Evil 0 subtly crystallized the production of what Lisa Lynch (1998) calls “the neo/bio/colonial hot zone”—that is, the legitimation of international intervention upon African territories as a means of combating the threat of global pandemic. Premised with the objective of offering insight into how the virus of the Resident Evil franchise was made, Resident Evil 0 offers parallels between what one of the characters, Billy Coen, has seen during his military service in “Africa” and the effects of the disease upon U.S. populations (Capcom, 2002a). It is never fully articulated within Resident Evil 0, however, whether the bodies he saw in Africa were afflicted with the same condition as those he has seen within the United States—though the game makes this suggestion via a brief flashback sequence (See Figures 5.11-12). Whether the African subjects suffered from the same affliction or not, the link between the experiences is consistently made within the game via not just this flashback but that of another of Billy’s as well. In essence, the connection is this: the Umbrella virus induces madness and suffering; and Africa is a site of madness and suffering as well.

In conjunction with the revisions made with the rerelease of Resident Evil 1, then, the Resident Evil franchise repositions the source of outbreak as ultimately stemming from natural causes—Africa. And yet, even at this point, it was not yet clear what direction the franchise would take. The introduction of the African Origin Theory of Disease did connect the Resident Evil outbreak narrative with the Western tradition that had been popular in the 1990s (and continues to be popular); however, the Umbrella Corporation continued to be emphasized as well. The series, then, contained the narrative flexibility to push forward in any number of
Figures 5.11-12. (top-bottom). In Figure 11, we see the reaction Billy Coen (with Rebecca Chambers behind him) has to seeing a pile of skeletal remains. The player is then immediately provided with a flashback detailing the reason for his reaction (Figure 12). This flashback resonates with the one that had previously been witnessed of Billy’s military service in Africa.

directions, most notably: further exploring the consequences of finance capital and biological manipulation or continuing to emphasize the natural origins of pandemics. Narratives, however, are never self-contained things—as the influences sited throughout this chapter attest (e.g., the mukokuseki style)—and the essence of horror had begun to shift in the period after September
11th (Balmain, 2007). So though many narrative possibilities existed regarding the future of the
Resident Evil franchise, the constraints of the historical time and place of production made it so
that some possibilities were deemed more compelling than others. As the producer of Resident
Evil 4, Hiroyuki Kobayashi, would note, regarding an early version of the game:

The footage that we all saw last year at E3 was pretty much the same Resident Evil that everybody
has already played. We wanted to the change image of the franchise. We wanted to turn that all
around. (qtd. in IGN Staff, 2004a)

Or, as Travis Fahs (2009a), explains: “The usual playbook had grown predictable, and Studio 4
was looking for a new way to terrify.” In the aftermath of September 11th, terror had come to be
redefined as terrorism; in 2005, the Resident Evil franchise would follow suit with the release of
Resident Evil 4.

Resident Evil: The Counterterrorism Years (2005 – The Present)

If Irene Chien (2007) is correct in that the sense of terror experienced within the “survivor-
horror” video game genre stems as much from the ludic elements of gameplay as from the
narrative, then what ludic elements are capable of capturing the shift in the essence of horror that
had been underway post-9/11? This was the challenge faced by the producer for Resident Evil 4,
Shinji Mikami, for as Travis Fahs (2009a) wrote: “If Resident Evil [4] was to be scary, it would
have to surprise people. A zombie dog jumping through a window just couldn’t work anymore.”

This search for a ludic solution to the shifting definition of terror, however, would affect the
narrative thrust of the Resident Evil franchise beyond whether a zombie dog jumped through the
window or not. This is not to suggest that gameplay determines the narrative, or vice-versa, but
rather that the two elements are intertwined. An early attempt at “updating” the series’ ludic
elements to be more in-line with that of modern gaming conventions, for instance, failed so
dramatically to capture the sense of eschatological anxiety associated with the genre of the
outbreak narrative that the project was rebranded as the Devil May Cry franchise (Capcom,
Likewise, later attempts to extend the franchise’s narrative arc, while retaining the ludic conventions of the earlier games, felt unable to adequately speak to the anxieties of the present moment: they felt dated, at best (IGN Staff, 2004a); or spoke to a different sense of anxiety than that captured by the outbreak narrative, at worst (Fahs, 2009a; See Figures 5.14-15).

The implications of this entanglement between ludic design and narrative thrust would become clearer with the final, acceptable, version of Resident Evil 4 (and later, Resident Evil 5). The reimagining of the game would show that the ludic elements are not merely narrative
Figures 5.14-15. (top-bottom). In Figure 5.14, known as the “Fog Version,” this early build of Resident Evil 4 showed footage of Leon Kennedy exploring a gothic-style environment in search of the origins of the “Progenitor Virus”—the key virus in the Resident Evil franchise. Though this version never came to fruition, this build of the game suggests that the virus is of European origin, as opposed to the African Origin Theory offered in Resident Evil 0 and the Resident Evil 1 remake; an early trailer for the game specifically mentions this location as being: “The Cradle of the Progenitor Virus” (See Stanford, 2010). The bottom image, from the “Hookman Version,” seemed to deemphasize the outbreak narrative itself in favor of supernatural sources of horror. Each version was scrapped, though some character models and environments may have been reused for the final build of the game (Stanford, 2010).
architecture, the scaffolding upon which the game’s narrative is built (Jenkins, 2003), but rather deeply influenced by and imbricated within the logics of historical time and place. For in contrast to the arguments of Eric Freedman (2012) and Alexander Galloway (2006), identity is not a data type, an easily adjusted mathematical variable (Galloway, 2006, pp. 102-103; Freedman, 2012, pp. 288-289), but rather the construction of an identity speaks to the anxieties and desires of particular populations—and even more so when this history of anxiety and desire embedded within the process of identity construction is effaced by the suggestion that identity is an ephemeral data type (Mejia, 2012). The narrative and ludic thrust of Resident Evil 4 (Capcom, 2005a) and Resident Evil 5 (Capcom, 2009) would show that the abstract categories of “the boss […] or the horde of regenerating enemies” are not “generalized character positions that drains [marginalized representations] of their abject status,” as Freedman (2012, p. 288) argues, but rather symbolic anchors, suggesting whom we ought to be weary of (narrative) and how to respond to them (ludic), when confronted with the possibility of pandemic.

The ludic framework of the early and middle Resident Evil franchise games called upon a definition of pandemic horror that had lost some dominance in the aftermath of September 11th. Affliction had once meant the transformation of an individual into an unassuming agent of infection (at best) or catatonic “human virus bomb” (at worst) (Lynch, 1998). The zombie, the iconic figure of the early and middle Resident Evil franchise, had captured this sense of anxiety well, with its image of a lumbering, passionless—and highly contagious—walking corpse (Boon, 2007; Dendle, 2007). The ludic fragmentation of the early and middle Resident Evil franchise, with its constant cinematic cutting and reframing of the action (See Figures 5.4-8), captured the sense of paranoia in operation within this particular logic of horror (Chien, 2007). Though this
form of horror (i.e., paranoia) clearly continues to resonate with audiences, today it seems relegated to the realm of psychological and/or supernatural horror:

In light of the events of 9/11, it is no surprise that the apocalyptic horror film has emerged as the dominant trend in American horror cinema within two distinct strands: the post-modern “urbanoid horror film” […] and the monstrous-child horror film. (Balmain, 2007, p. 135)

It is within the mold of the “post-modern ‘urbanoid’ horror film” that the image of the zombie was rearticulated to capture this recent shift in cultural anxiety:

No longer deadpan, stolid, and unfeeling, the zombie is not an image of humanity stripped of passion, soul, or spirit. The zombie has become enraged, feral, frantic, and insatiable: it is a gutted, animalistic core of hunger and fury. It is not homogeneity—not the leveling of individuality—that scares us anymore, then […]: it is rather the lack of control, dignity, direction that scares us. The contemporary zombie embodies a wanton, unfettered pursuit of immediate physical cravings, a fear of raw power. (Dendle, 2007, p. 54)

Though off-screen movement continues to be an effective tactic for this form of horror as well, this emphasis on absolute terror, in addition to paranoia, calls for the extensive use of long- and medium-shots so that viewers are always aware not just of the horror that remains off-screen, but also the horror that is explicitly on-screen as well (See Figure 5.16). Likewise, as had the Resident Evil franchise before, Resident Evil 4 would articulate this sense of fear through the implementation of particular ludic conventions; most significantly, through the use of an over-the-shoulder tracking-shot (See Figure 5.17).

The use of an over-the-shoulder tracking-shot as the primary point of perspective for the player had the effect of radically reconfiguring the outbreak narrative that had been produced through the Resident Evil franchise. In the early games, the zombies were relatively indistinguishable from one another, and this resonated with the sympathy the player was expected to have with those who had become infected; in other words, there was a clear distinction between being human and being infected—being infected had no weight upon the prior character of the individual. In Resident Evil 4, however, one is forced to confront the face of the other, and in doing so, cannot help but notice that even prior to infection, these populations
were never like us. The infected, then, do not garner sympathy, for in being unlike us, it is unclear at what moment they came to stand against us; in other words, when did infection begin?

Figures 5.16-17. (top-bottom). Contemporary horror films and video games, particularly those featuring zombies and monsters, have featured hordes of raging monsters, as in these images from *28 Weeks Later* (top) and *Resident Evil 4* (bottom) illustrate.

were never like us. The infected, then, do not garner sympathy, for in being unlike us, it is unclear at what moment they came to stand against us; in other words, when did infection begin?
This ambiguity had the effect of revitalizing the terror embedded within the experience of the survival horror:

They weren’t zombies; they could run, talk, and use tools. But they weren’t human anymore, either, and they could scare the crap out of anyone. (Fahs, 2009a)

You’re trapped here. There are crazy characters out there. You don’t know what they might do or how they’ll react to your presence. The sun is shining and yet you don’t feel at all safe. […] The enemies steam out and fights are never far off. […] We encountered no old-style scare scenarios where foes would sneak unto our character and frighten us. Instead, the play elements are in your face. And believe us when we state that it’s every bit as intense. (IGN Staff, 2004b)

The ambiguity, however, also had the effect of requiring the addition of a narrative thread capable of explaining away the reason one could not distinguish between whom was infected and whom was not (if such a thing existed). This plot device would, conveniently, be Religion and Terrorism.

Though the enemies of *Resident Evil 4*, referred to as Los Ganados (Spanish for “The Cattle”), are not marked as Muslim, as the faith they follow is referenced as that of the cult of Los Illuminados (Spanish for “The Enlightened Ones”) (Capcom, 2005a), this plot device resonates strongly with the discourse surrounding the global War on Terror. Indeed, the premise of the game is as follows: Leon Kennedy (from *Resident Evil 2* fame) has gone on to become part of the U.S. Secret Service; the President’s daughter, Ashley, has been kidnapped by an extremist religious cult; and, this cult is looking to overthrow the United States by infecting Ashley, and then returning her to her father:

[Leon:] What do you want to do?

[Osmund Saddler, the religious leader of Los Illuminados:] To demonstrate to the whole world, our astounding power of course. No longer will the United states think they can police the world forever. So we kidnapped the President’s daughter to [infect her] then send her back. […] When the [infection matures], you’ll become my pupets. Involuntarily, you’ll do as I say. I’ll have total control over your mind. Don’t you think this is a revolutionary way to propagate one’s faith?

[Leon:] Sounds more like an alien invasion if you ask me! (Capcom, 2005a)
Leon’s words ring true in more ways than one; for not only is infection conceived as a foreign body afflicting a host body, within *Resident Evil 4*, the disease is of foreign origin as well. This foreign disease, the effect of ancient parasites indigenous to the region, Las Plagas, moreover, is conceived as more insidious than the virus that had been associated with the Umbrella Corporation of the earlier *Resident Evil* games. This was emphasized both through ludic and narrative conventions. In terms of gameplay, whereas the zombies of old were relatively mindless and would wonder aimlessly towards the player, the Ganados of *Resident Evil 4* would coordinate attacks and relentlessly hunt down the player (Capcom, 2005a). Though some may argue that this distinction is merely the result of advances in artificial intelligence and computer processing power, which could allow for not just more compelling enemy coordination but also the presence of an increased number of enemies more generally, the game developers felt otherwise; for though it is clear that the Ganados of *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005a) are afflicted with a form of zombification (See Boon, 2007), Capcom consistently emphasized that the infected villagers were not zombies (Fahs, 2009a; IGN Staff, 2004a, 2004b). As Hiroyuki Kobayashi, producer for *Resident Evil*, noted: “They look like zombies, but they are not. That being said they are not humans either” (IGN Staff, 2004b). How, then, are we to understand the function of this subject? A subject, whose, all-too-human monstrosity “could scare the crap out of anyone,” when conventional monstrosity no longer could (Fahs, 2009a)?

The reinvigoration of the outbreak narrative through an infusion of post-9/11 counterterrorism discourse suggests that what is most frightening today is not that infection might produce monstrosity, but rather that monstrosity might not need infection. For though *Resident Evil 4* makes it clear through the course of the game that the Ganados are infected with a zombie-like affliction, the distinction between monstrosity and normality is unclear. Near the
beginning of the game, for instance, the player as Leon Kennedy observes a scene not unlike that from the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Nispel, 2003), in which the backwardness of the villagers is associated with the monstrosity of the situation (See Figure 5.18). The non-zombie, zombie-like status of the villagers, then, speaks to the politics of subject formation embedded within representations of monstrosity. If the historical conception of “the monster and the person to be corrected are close cousins” (Puar & Rai, 2002, p. 119), then, the contrast between the protagonists and antagonists of *Resident Evil 4* speaks to contemporary anxieties regarding Islam and bioterrorism. More to the point, *Resident Evil 4* operates as one site in which the eschatology of the outbreak narrative is rearticulated in accordance with the discourses surrounding contemporary terrorism, in which terrorist populations are always already suffering from affliction (Puar & Rai, 2002). The warning embedded within the definition of the non-zombie, zombie-like villagers as Los Ganados (“the cattle”) is that living the life of a cultural zombie is
synonymous with becoming a “real” zombie itself; or rather, the fear for those who believe that national and/or global culture has come to be decadent is that a real zombie apocalypse may be right around the corner (Dendle, 2007; Farnham, 2012). And yet, though Resident Evil 4 introduced the concept of the cultural zombie to the outbreak narrative of the Resident Evil franchise, it would not be until the production of Resident Evil 5 that the implications of this entanglement of culture, contagion, and terrorism would raise concern (See: Brock, 2009, 2011; Freedman, 2012; Hutchinson, 2009; John, 2008c; Mastrapa, 2008; Narcisse, 2009a, 2009b).

Resident Evil 5 (Capcom, 2009) revealed the extent of the cultural logic behind the entanglement of the mukokuseki style with that of the outbreak narrative and counterterrorism discourse. If the mukokuseki style had meant the conception of the Western subject as being synonymous with the universal subject (Iwabuchi, 2002), the infusion of this aesthetic with that of the outbreak narrative and counterterrorism discourse meant that so too would these latter concepts be imagined from the experience of the subject position of these Western subjects. This requires clarification, in that I am not suggesting that the game, Resident Evil 5—a game developed in Japan by a Japanese corporation—unambiguously articulates the cultural logic of whiteness, but rather that the racial imagining of the mukokuseki style proposes an idealized universal subject that links up with the cultural logic of whiteness, with Japanese characteristics of course. To take a page from David Harvey (2007), if China’s contemporary economic system can be understood as Western neoliberalism “with Chinese characteristics” (p. 120-151), then might we not understand the global proliferation of racism to operate within a similar logic; that is, might the cultural logics embedded within the Resident Evil franchise be indicative of the proliferation of Western racial logics with Japanese characteristics?
Indeed, I am not the first to suggest that Japan’s contemporary racial politics ought to be understood in relation to its history with the West (B. Armstrong, 1989; Nanta, 2008; Prieler, 2010; Robertson, 2002; J. Russell, 1991; Yamashiro, 2011). As Jennifer Robertson (2002) argues, Japan’s contemporary racial politics operates as a fusion of Western Eugenics and Japan’s history of “strategic endogamy”: “the transaction of marriages exclusively among and within certain categories of people defined by social status and geographical location” (p. 201). li

This historical practice of “strategic endogamy” operated as a racialized logic to the extent that marriage within one’s local population was believed to be more “stable […] in that they were free from disruptive anxieties” associated with marrying foreign populations (Robertson, 2002, p. 201). The introduction of Western Eugenics—which was translated into Japanese as yûseigaku (“science of superior birth”)—extended the racialized logic of Japan’s history of “strategic endogamy” through the conception of “eugenic endogamy”: the replacement of “one type of kin group endogamy with another system […]”, which basically amounted to the introduction of ‘universal endogamy’ among theoretically pure-blooded Japanese” (Robertson, 2002, p. 207; See also Yamashiro, 2011). This conception of ethnicity has the effect of conceiving of the ethnic body as an always already national body, regardless of whether or not a given population resides within the “appropriate” national border (Yamashiro, 2011). The measure of a nation, from this perspective, then, is tied to the ethnic integrity of the nation’s rightful population (Nanta, 2008; Robertson, 2002). Hence, Mukokuseki speaks not necessarily of the United States, or the West, but rather the Japanese imagination of whiteness as an obtainable state of racial purity that brings with it certain global privileges (See: Iwabuchi, 2002; Prieler, 2010; Robertson, 2002). If whiteness is associated with modernity and the universal subject (Iwabuchi, 2002; Prieler, 2010), however, the contemporary formation of whiteness also serves as an allegory for Japanese racial
anxieties: in the mid-1980s both former Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhio and prominent Liberal Democrat Michio Watanabe each, on separate occasions, suggested that the economic struggles of the United States was due to the presence of “blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans” (J. Russell, 1991, pp. 3-4).

The point of this aside on the racial politics of Japan is not to paint Japan as more or less racist than the United States—as this would ignore the affect Western hegemony has had on the global circulation of race (Nanta, 2008; J. Russell, 1991)—but rather to situate the Resident Evil franchise as a transnational text embedded within the global anxieties and desires of racial purity. The flexibility of the mukokuseki aesthetic means that both Western and Japanese audiences can read themselves into the outbreak narrative presented within the Resident Evil franchise; and hence, it serves as a site for thinking through global biopolitical anxiety and desire:

Chris [is] a very serious and straight-laced person. […] He probably isn’t good at dealing with other people because he takes his work so seriously. […] Japanese people tend to like those kinds of characters more than Americans do. (Jun Takeuchi, producer for Resident Evil 5, qtd. in Narcisse, 2009b)

Personally when I see someone (a zombie if you will) with blood coming from the corners of their mouth/eyes/anus with the intent of causing me bodily harm, no matter their color or gender, I am going to kill them in any way I can. (trueb7ue, see comment section of Sterling, 2009)

These two examples, one from the producer of Resident Evil 5, Jun Takeuchi, and the other from a presumably Western subject, under the alias of trueb7ue, illustrate how various populations can read themselves into the text and to what effect (particularly regarding the latter). The linkage of the mukokuseki style with that of the outbreak narrative and contemporary War on Terror discourse within Resident Evil 4 (Capcom, 2005a) and Resident Evil 5 (Capcom, 2009) brings to the surface the underwriting logics of race that had been present throughout the Resident Evil franchise. For though it was not until Resident Evil 5 that the franchise became a lightning rod for representations of race within video games (See: Brock, 2009, 2011; Freedman, 2012; Hutchinson, 2009; John, 2008c; Mastrapa, 2008; Narcisse, 2009a, 2009b; Schiesel, 2009;
Sterling, 2009), the conception of whiteness as the organizational logic of the franchise had long been present within the series: the citizens of Raccoon City, in *Resident Evil 1-3* (Capcom, 1996, 1998, 1999) were represented as deserving of sympathy only to the extent that they were racialized as White subjects; in *Resident Evil 4* and 5, though this sympathy is still there, one cannot help but feel that the rural Spanish (*Resident Evil 4*) and African populations (*Resident Evil 5*) are marked as always already suspect (Brock, 2009, 2011). This is most clearly represented by an early scene in *Resident Evil 5* of three African villagers beating a large human-sized sack with wooden clubs (See Figure 5.19; See also Figure 5.18 regarding *Resident Evil 4*).

Though both the developers of *Resident Evil* and many of the fans of the franchise would argue that the situating of *Resident Evil 5* in Africa was the result of the logical outcome of the narrative (See: Freedman, 2012; Gametrailers, 2008; comments section of Hutchinson, 2009), as
I have sought to argue throughout this section, these defenses ignore the ideological investment of the *mukokuseki* style within the production of this particular narrative. Within the *daikaiju eiga* and apocalyptic film traditions of Japanese cinema, unbridled scientific research is condemned to the extent that it results in the production of unnatural bodies. When those bodies are already marked as socially and/or physically aberrant or inferior, however, the history of Japan’s racial politics, like that of the West, conceives of these populations as not a population to be protected but rather one to be managed, for fear of infecting the rest of us (Nanta, 2008; Robertson, 2002). The ease in which the *Resident Evil* franchise was able to reposition rural populations and Africa as the original site of infection, moreover, speaks to the cultural logics at play in global narratives of outbreak. Far from the ludic conventions of gameplay draining the abject status of race (Freedman, 2012), then, it would seem that the articulation of ludic conventions is itself infused with the politics of biopolitical anxiety and desire. The *Resident Evil* franchise could have been, and indeed has been, otherwise. In *Resident Evil: Outbreak* (Capcom, 2003), for instance, the player takes control of one of several civilians and can cooperatively play with another as they attempt to make it out of the growing pandemic in Raccoon City. Infection did not mean instant death or condemnation, as the premise instead is that this fairly diverse group (in terms of race, class, and gender) is already infected, and instead they must work together to both escape the site of pandemic (the city) as well as search for a cure along the way (Capcom, 2003). Though this entry into the *Resident Evil* franchise did garner a sequel, the overall series had already moved on, and hence the outbreak narrative and its ludic conventions failed to resonate with global audiences (Fahs, 2009a). In the post-9/11 world, terrorism offered a more compelling narrative thread in which to understand the source of outbreak. In this world, infection needed to be understood in terms of unambiguous evil: in contrast to *Resident Evil: 
Outbreak, wherein one could be both afflicted and retain one’s sense of humanity, and potentially be cured, within the logic of the War on Terror, infection is tantamount to guilt. Though the Umbrella Corporation continues to operate in the shadows throughout the later games in the Resident Evil franchise, the real source of affliction, as explained narratively throughout Resident Evil 4 and Resident Evil 5 is that participating in a false religion (Resident Evil 4) and/or possessing anti-Western sentiment (Resident Evil 5) opens one's self up to infection. The later Resident Evil franchise, then, operates as an apologia for contemporary Empire, in that the articulation of global ecologies of anxiety and desire is ultimately pinned upon those populations which refuse to and/or are unable to operate within the transnational logic of Empire; the corruption of global capital is not to be found within the logic of capital, but rather those countries which do not embrace the benevolent ways of Empire, and thus fall victim to corporations that operate outside the purview of capitalism proper—never mind that global capital is often only able to procure pleasure through its extraction from third- to first-world countries.

Conclusion: Conversations worth Having

In a thoughtful and compellingly written piece, video game journalist Evan Narcisse (2009a) wrote that questions of race and racism in video games are never easy conversations, but they are ones, nevertheless, worth having. Dismissing these conversations as politically correct nonsense (See: comments section of Hutchinson, 2009; Schiesel, 2009) and/or “retarded” (Sterling, 2009), however, has the effect of reproducing the racial logics underwriting the production and dominant consumption of digital play (C. R. King, 2012; Narcisse, 2009a). That is, these quick and often aggressive dismissals of these conversations speak to the desire by some populations to
keep existing regimes of pleasure intact, and to not acknowledge the substructures of displeasure in which these regimes of power are built upon (C. R. King, 2012).

Though I have spent a significant portion of this chapter discussing the racial logics embedded within the history of the Resident Evil franchise, particularly as articulated through the mukokuseki style, the truth of the matter is that one does not even need to go that far to understand the racial politics of contemporary digital play. The political economic circuits of global production and consumption already suggest that the experience of contemporary digital pleasure operates according to racial, classed, and gendered logics, in terms of how labor and leisure are organized. National and international ecologies are being reconfigured so as to satisfy the desire for certain populations to experience pleasure while experiencing minimal displeasure. This is articulated through the global supply chain of contemporary digital play: tantalum and other raw materials increasingly being extracted under extremely harsh conditions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Dizolele, 2007; Domoney, et al., 2011; Dyer-Witheford; Hayes & Burge, 2003; Montague, 2002); consoles and computers nearly universally manufactured in China and other “developing economic zones” (Bjorhus, 2000; Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kerr, 2006; Kline, et al., 2003; Markoff, 2001); rote programming being undertaken in China, Eastern Europe, and South America, as well (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009); with even the comparatively well-paid “knowledge workers” in the United States, Australia, and Europe (and to a lesser extent Japan) frequently under duress due to unpaid crunch-time and uncertain job security (Bonds, et al., 2004; Dyer-Witheford, 1999; EA Spouse, 2004; McMillen, 2011). This circuit of racialized, classed, and gendered production that undergirds contemporary ecologies of pleasure and displeasure continues within the game world as well, when considering the history of call centers, game testers, and contemporary
“gold farmers” in online games (Nakamura, 2009). Hence, one does not need to go far to understand how digital play is not just entrenched within these circuits of production and consumption, but also actively invested in their continued production.

Why then the analysis of the Resident Evil franchise? What might it add to our understanding of these global circuits of anxiety and desire? What this analysis of the Resident Evil franchise does, I believe, is to illustrate how we must understand how the contemporary experience of anxiety and desire operates through transnational circuits of production and consumption. The eschatological anxiety and desire that others have recognized as endemic to our historical moment (Baumgartner, 1999; Carey, 2002; Keränen, 2011) is inflected with the raced, classed and gendered (amongst other) interests of not just Western, but increasingly other capitalist populations as well. This is not cause for celebration, as in the destabilization of Western hegemony, and the birth of a new era of a more egalitarian platform for the expression of global anxiety and desire, however; rather, it calls for the increased scrutiny of increasingly global artifacts with a sensitivity to the complex circuits of production and consumption at play in the transnational circulation of these artifacts. What I have attempted to show through this analysis of the Resident Evil franchise, then, is that the fusion of the Western outbreak narrative with that of Japan’s daikaiju eiga and apocalyptic horror traditions, via the use of the mukokuseki style, operates as an important site in which video game players engage with contemporary discourses regarding global terrorism; this particular configuration, as articulated within the Resident Evil franchise, presents a global ecology in which racially pure (i.e., that is White, and by extension Japanese) subjects are to be vigilant against the possibility of cultural contamination from others, whether they be corrupt corporations (e.g., Resident Evil 1-3) or always already suspect, foreign, populations (e.g., Resident Evil 4-5). Hence, the Resident Evil
franchise contributes to the conception of the world as organized according to naturalized ecologies of exception and exemption, in that these regional differences are explained as being due not necessarily to economic exploitation, but rather intrinsic racialized characteristics.

Notes:

xliii The miners are actually paid for procuring coltan—an ore rich in the element tantalum (Vick, 2001).
xliv As Stephen O’Leary (1997) makes clear, the point is not whether a given apocalyptic warning—whether emerging from secular or religious origins—is more plausible than others, but rather that we ought to “recognize the forces at work in public evaluation of these discourses, whether they possess scientific merit or are completely spurious” (p. 311). In essence, it is the rhetorical form in terms of production and reception that matter most in the circulation and effect of apocalyptic narratives.
xlv Clearly, African American Women can take on a variety of sexual orientations, as can other populations as well. However, to the extent that homosexuality is typically associated with White, Middle-Class, Men, then other populations, LGBT or otherwise, are obscured when a phenomena is considered to be an exclusive Gay experience—regardless of whether the experience is interpreted through conservative or progressive frameworks (Hocker, 2011; Manalansan, 2005)
xlvi As of this writing, Resident Evil 6 is in development but has not yet been released.
xlvii Even in Western horror cinema, when the zombie is understood as part of a cultural phenomenon, the conception is that the “contemporary zombie embodies a wanton, unfettered pursuit of immediate physical cravings, a fear of raw power [or rather animality]” (Dendle, 2007, p. 54). This is the fear that others will not be able to keep in check their consumptive desires, and thus the becoming of a cultural zombie is a sign of one’s individual failure—hence, the demeaning practice of calling someone a zombie.
xlviii In this case, Japanese postwar cinema shares with it a similar concern as that of the English romantics, such as Mary Shelley’s (1818/2003) Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus.
xliii Though merely a coincidence, it is fascinating to note that this announcement of returning to its origins was announced on September 11th, 2001.
1 Even the Centers for Disease Control (2012) has sought to capitalize upon this cultural fascination with the zombie, with the center producing a guide to the zombie apocalypse: “It can be tough to get people thinking about emergency preparedness before disaster strikes. We’ve created these zombie posters to spark some attention and get people involved before its too late.”
li As Jennifer Robertson (2002) continues to note, “in Japan, [these practices of strategic endogamy] were not limited to elites” (p. 201).
lii Indeed, in Resident Evil 5 (Capcom, 2009), the player learns through in-game memos that anti-government rebels were one means by which the Umbrella Corporation was able to get a foothold in Africa. Moreover, the game includes footage that was directly inspired by Black Hawk Down (Scott, 2001), and thus equates anti-western sentiment as being motivated by biopolitical corruption.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: CHOOSING TO LISTEN

This dissertation has been driven by the premise that it is time for game studies to move beyond studying and theorizing the artifact of gaming itself—whether conceived of as audience, text, or platform—and toward grasping the totality of digital play as it operates throughout the larger circuits of global culture and political economy. As I have tried to show, the efficacy of game studies is limited to the extent that digital play remains concerned only with the analysis of audiences, texts, platforms, and even political economies that are explicitly marked as being a part of the proper domain of gaming. Influenced by the work of continental theorists, such as, Michel Foucault, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Virilio, and cultural theorists, such as James Carey, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams, I have tried to show how the logics of digital play have come to be dispersed throughout various global political economic and cultural circuits; that is, if digital play operates as the quintessential game of Empire (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009), and is hence paradigmatic of neoliberalism (Redmond, 2012), then it seems to me that digital play should not be conceived any longer as operating solely within the confines of conventional gaming. Rather, as I have argued, digital play is not a sideshow to the machinations of contemporary Empire, a distraction for the masses, but rather an important engine and archive documenting the historical and transnational rearticulation of Empire as it has spread across the globe. To the extent this attempt has been successful, then, I offer this dissertation as an incomplete model upon which future transnational and historical studies of digital play—writ large—can build upon.

This of course was not the initial expectation I had for this project, for when I began my aspirations were much more humble; I had begun with the feeling that gaming had something to
say about our contemporary moment, which seemed to me at the time to have something to do with the playing out of our anxieties and desires. This premise did not appear to be too controversial in that a cursory glance at some of the most popular gaming franchises would suggest that the anxieties and desires of the moment have often worked their way in as major plot devices. Indeed, the names *Missile Command*, *Biohazard / Resident Evil*, *Fallout*, amongst others, would seem to suggest as much. I could not shake the feeling, however, that I would get every time someone would hear of the topic of my dissertation, and respond, “Oh! That must be fun!” Sure, I could think of worse topics, for me at least, but the thought of fun had not been a factor when choosing this project. My first choice, in fact, had been to explore the rhetoric of religion as a structural form as opposed to a belief system, perhaps in the mold of Stephen O’Leary’s (1993, 1997) work. That seemed like fun! And yet, I imagine that had I selected that topic, no one would have commented about the inherent pleasure that drives most academics to engage in scholarly work (See Weed, 2010). Fun, then, seemed to me to be a way—whether intentional or not—of diminishing the political significance of this project. Perhaps due to this, I felt an obligation to treat this subject matter with the seriousness that it deserved. If others were going to judge this dissertation against other topics of legitimate scholarliness (i.e., the unmarked fun research), then it seemed as though I had an obligation to show them why video games matter to their research; that is, why their ignorance of this topic, bracketed off as fun, was their loss so to speak.

To this end, I have sought to write and research the best dissertation given the constraints of time and place, and have poured through hundreds of documents and, yes, games, as well. And I have enjoyed it. I have no regrets for choosing to write upon a topic that has enabled me to learn how the circulation of digital play has transformed global economic circuits of
production and consumption, from the flexible knowledge economies of first-world countries to
the inflexible manufacturing and mining economies of second- and third-world nations (See
Chapter Three). I have no regrets for choosing to write upon a topic that enabled me to learn how
the circulation of digital play has transformed the operation of modern warfare, in terms of
legitimation, recruitment, training, and combat as well (See Chapter Four). And, I definitely have
no regrets for choosing to write upon a topic that has enabled me to learn how these circuits of
anxiety and desire operate on a global level, and thus work to legitimate the life and death of
some over others (See Chapter Five).

Through the course of exploring the linkages between digital play and global economies,
militarism, and ecologies, I have learned that sometimes the text in itself is a red herring (See
Chapter Two). That is, the content of the games can matter significantly (as I indeed have spent
significant time undertaking their analysis) but also ought to be situated within the context of
their production and consumption. And yet, this approach forced me to move beyond a
conventional political economic analysis as well, in that my study was never concerned with
gaming as it manifests within the video game industry. This was a concern, of course, but my
primary objective was to search out those patterns of consumption and production that enable us
to understand how the logic of digital play extends beyond, as well as sometimes originates
outside of, the site of conventional gaming itself. This conclusion, then, is dedicated to: (1)
crystalizing the contributions I believe this dissertation has made to our understanding of
contemporary global politics and culture; and (2) point towards directions that future research
motivated by this project may be interested in addressing.
The Digital Game of Life

Digital play has long been embedded in what Hardt and Negri (2001) term the three pillars of contemporary Empire: “the bomb, money, and ether” (p. 345). The industry emerged from within the shadows of the military-industrial complex (Halter, 2006), then through the careful production of a counter-cultural ethos based upon White male privilege (See Kent, 2001, pp. 51, 56-57), sought to gain entry into the middle-class without experiencing the rigidity associated with the bureaucracy of Fordist era capitalism (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Kline, et al., 2003). Though today it is popularly thought that Apple, by way of Steve Jobs, proved that “you could not only have fun at work, but that pursuing a capitalist dream could be hip” (O'Grady, 2009, p. x), this lesson was taught to Jobs by way of his time at Atari in the mid-1970s (See: Cifaldi, 2011; Kent, 2001). Indeed, as I argued in Chapter Three, the emergence of the video game industry in the early 1970s operated as an electronic engine of economic transition modeling the virtues and appeal of flexible capital prior to the widespread adoption in the 1980s (See: Harvey, 2007; Sennett, 1998). And to this day, the video game industry has continued to work hard to maintain its image as the proper home of the post-Fordist creative class: from naming projects after attractive female employees and the prospect of playing free games in the 1970s (Kent, 2001; See also Cifaldi, 2011) to hiring “booth babes” to work at major industry conventions today (See Figure 1.1, p. 7). And, though the benefits of belonging to this creative class are unevenly distributed—and hence working as part of this knowledge economy is (1) not all it is made out to be and (2) functionally foreclosed for those subjects whose desires do not properly align with that of patriarchal desire (Bonds, et al., 2004; EA Spouse, 2004)—this image of post-Fordist capital continues to be an attractive prospect for many populations (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009; Sennett, 1998).
The emergence and ongoing popularity of digital play has transformed the contemporary configuration of modern warfare as well, in terms of both legitimation and operation. Many of the most popular, early video games, from *SpaceWar!* (S. Russell, 1962) to *Missile Command* (Atari, 1980b), for example, resonated thematically with the Cold War politics of the era. And indeed the popularity of military-themed video games has been a constant throughout the history of digital play: *Combat* (Atari, 1977), *Battlezone* (Atari, 1980a), the *Metal Gear* franchise (Konami, 1987, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2008), *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software, 1992), *Doom* (GT Interactive, 1993), the *Command & Conquer* franchise (Electronic Arts, 1999a, 2000a, 2003a, 2008a; Virgin Interactive, 1995, 1996), and the *Call of Duty* series (Activision, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2008a, 2009a, 2010a, 2011b), to name a few of the more iconic examples. This ongoing relationship between the military-industrial complex and the contemporary video game industry is even more pronounced when one moves beyond the quantity of military-games produced and consumed to a consideration of the feedback loop in operation between these two institutions: with technologies, consultants, and even audiences (e.g., gamers/soldiers) regularly flowing back and forth between the military and gaming industries.

For this reason and more, as I argued in Chapter Four, we ought to understand the contemporary form of the video game—again, writ large—to operate as an important site of military ballistics; that is, the anxieties and desires embedded within the feedback loop in operation between the military-industrial complex and the video game industry and culture has operated—and continues to operate—as an important force affecting the trajectory of contemporary military endeavors. This relationship, I believe, will only grow stronger as the United States military and those of other nations are reconfigured for the use of drones and other forms of “unmanned” combat, which will require the ability to “extract three-dimensional
situational awareness from a two-dimensional screen” (Col. Michael McKinney, qtd. in Cantwell, 2009), skills that are already being highly refined via contemporary gameplay, as former President Ronald Reagan (1983) noted years earlier. In this regard, video games operate not only as a site for imagining the near-future scenarios of modern warfare, but through the technological, political, and cultural overlap with the military-industrial complex, also operates as a site wherein this near-future reality is actively being manufactured.

Imbricated throughout these twin pillars of capitalist accumulation and (inter)national security is the sense that we are in the midst of a planetary crisis. Procurement of the raw materials needed to enable the pleasures and comfort of first- and (increasingly) second-world populations (See Redmond, 2012) is dramatically impacting the sustainability of both the regional ecologies of third-world countries and by extension global ecologies as well. The exploitation of mining populations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for instance, has destabilized the agricultural base of various local economies within the nation, so that unsustainable hunting practices have taken hold near the mines, thus decimating and drastically transforming these regional ecologies (Hayes & Burge, 2003). Though video games cannot account for the totality of mining interests present in the region, considering that much of new media technologies are imbricated with the economies and cultures of digital play, then it would seem as though concern for the ecological effects of transnational capital must include an account of gaming, as I argued in Chapter Five.

Moreover, digital play is not just an engine for the active reconfiguration of global politics and economies towards what Nick Dyer-Witheford (2010) calls the construction of a planetary factory—“a regime that subsumes not just production, consumption, and social reproduction (as in Fordism), but life’s genetic and ecological dimensions” (Dyer-Witheford,
2010, p. 485)—but rather operates as I have argued throughout this dissertation as an important site wherein this attempted reconfiguration of the globe along these lines is legitimated and actively taken up. That is, it is not just that the substructures of contemporary digital play are built upon the backs of populations ranging from the miners of the DRC to the console manufacturer sweatshop workers in Mexico, China, and elsewhere, but also that the content of these games often works to actively encourage and discourage certain anxieties and desires associated with this recognition over others. Popular games such as *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005a) and *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009), for instance, simultaneously represents marginalized populations as victims of transnational capital, while also suggesting that these populations became victims due to their commitment to non-Western and/or explicitly anti-Western practices (See Chapter Five). This helps to alleviate any anxiety associated with our culpability in the extraction of pleasure from these various regions, as the lesson is that even were our involvement to be removed, the commitment of these populations to strange, non-Western religions and practices would ultimately lead to the same end of suffering—as it is this indigenous culture itself that is conceived as the true source of the local population’s suffering. And yet, because we are aware of the global consequences of ecological instability, this problem that we have helped to create—but subsequently effectively removed ourselves from its making—becomes reconceived as our problem, thereby justifying our continued presence within these various regions, not as equals invested in the search for a common solution, but often rather as experts seeking to uncover a solution that is acceptable for our needs.

The significance of digital play for our understanding of legitimation, I argue, however, is not that it is a popular form of entertainment that operates across various domains of anxiety and desire—for clearly the justification of contemporary global politics operates across a variety of
mediums (See: Keränen, 2011; Lynch, 1998; Ono, 2009b; Said, 1993)—but rather that the much
touted interactive interface of the medium creates, sustains, transforms, and mobilizes the
political economic and cultural logics necessary for the functioning of contemporary Empire.
Communication technologies have long played significant roles in the cultural reconfiguration of
society, from the printing press (Starr, 2004) to the telegraph (Carey, 1983/2009), sound
recording technologies (Sterne, 2005), film (Virilio, 1984/2009), and television (R. Williams,
1974/2005), and this is no less true of the digital media technologies of today. Though some
would argue, reasonably, that the defining medium of our age is the internet or computer, it
seems to me that the political economic, cultural, and ecological gravity of digital play must be
held within the same conversation. This is for the most significant technological development of
our era is not necessarily the pervasiveness of communication—for then our moment would be
merely a difference of quantitative degree—but the ever accelerating trend towards the
expectation of action within virtual-space and -time. Let me clarify, it clearly is a matter of
importance of whether or not one is saturated with the possibility of communication, however, in
an environment oversaturated as such, the only means of managing such a possibility is through
the widespread adherence and integration of society with simulation: the speed of financial
markets is such that real economies can no longer be distinguished from speculative (i.e.,
simulated) economies (Dyer-Witheford, 2010; Harvey, 2007); and, the militaristic desire to
merge “seeing and foreseeing” so as to have the “fastest possible access to pictures of the
enemy’s forces and reserves” (Virilio, 1984/2009, p. 4), have made it so that the “combined
video output [from Iraq and Afghanistan in the year 2010 alone] would take one person four
decades to watch” (The Economist, 2010). ; and, in social life as well, it has become increasingly
untenable to operate without the assistance of the avatar, whether it be conceived as the
Facebook profile or some other form of digital assistance (Mejia, 2012). What these examples point to is the increasing inability for various sectors of contemporary society to operate without the aid of artificial intelligence, of which the video game is perhaps the most prominent ambassador (Manovich, 2001). Video games are not just sites wherein cultural anxiety and desire circulate, but rather the logic of digital play also operates as the engines of these affective manifestations. In other words, to the extent that the contemporary manifestation of Empire operates across the virtualization of the bomb, money, and even social space itself, then digital play operates as the privileged mechanism by which the subjects of contemporary Empire are produced; if the barracks and schoolhouses of discipline operated as the privileged site of governance in the past, today it is the biopolitics of pleasure and play.

It is this dual nature of digital play, moreover, that demands our attention; for if digital play simultaneously functions as an archive and engine of contemporary political economic and cultural politics, then the fact that this medium has long operated on the transnational level offers us insight into the anxieties and desires associated with the operation of contemporary capital on the global level. Many of the most popular video games either take up transnational subject matter and/or are produced through the creative energies of transnational developers. As my analysis of the Resident Evil franchise suggested, an examination of the content and practices of digital play—in terms of production and consumption—can offer insights into how cultural politics operate at the global level, while also maintaining insight into the various regional, national, and transnational interests embedded within the artifact. My analysis of the Resident Evil series, for instance, suggested that the franchise operates as an archive documenting the ongoing entanglement of U.S. and Japanese racial politics. The particular expression of the cultural politics embedded within the series were not necessarily top-down impositions onto
gaming populations, however, for rather so too was the developer, *Capcom*, caught up within the transnational flows of anxiety and desire: in the post-9/11 environment, the series initially foundered as it sought to rebrand itself as culturally relevant for an era marked by the reconfiguration of terror as terrorist.

**Must Everything Be Fun?**

That the cultural logic of digital play cannot be thought to exist solely within the conventional site of gaming—that is, those sites explicitly associated with video games—then it seems as though the possibilities for the future of game studies is not just rich and plentiful, but urgently in need of other studies looking to make connections between the operations of digital play—in terms of aesthetics, contents, economies, infrastructure, logics, producers, and consumers—and other forms of local, national, and global politics. To the extent, however, that much of game studies remains confined to the analysis of a particular domain of digital play, always already defined in advance as conventional gaming, even when seeking to move beyond this definition as such (Boellstorff, 2008; Castronova, 2006; Galloway, 2006; Montfort & Bogost, 2009), then we risk missing out on the significance of the proliferation of digital play in the larger geopolitical context (at best) or prematurely valorizing the political possibilities of digital play (at worst).

For instance, much energy has been directed toward the pedagogical possibilities of educational gaming, with much optimism being pronounced (Gee, 2001; Kee, et al., 2009; Squire & Jenkins, 2003; K. Weir & Baranowski, 2011). The arguments advanced in favor are that games make learning fun, and therefore promote eager and creative engagement with the assignment. The question rarely posed, however, is whether education ought to be fun at all—or rather, whether the purpose of education should be that of maximizing pleasure. As Dennis
Charsky and William Ressler (2011) note, the effectiveness of educational games diminishes when the subject matter is not fun; however, the recommendation embedded within their caution ought to give us pause:

This study carries with it a warning for educators who adopt game based learning approaches: Do not dilute the potential effectiveness of games by taking away the one distinct attribute that gives them their advantage—play. Like the games they complement, scaffolds [i.e., supplemental educational materials] must first engage students in order to enhance learning and motivation by seamlessly integrating learning with play. A number of frustrated students from the pre-generated map group wrote this in their journals. Their sentiments were captured succinctly in the words of one student—“Games are made for one purpose: fun.” (Charsky & Ressler, 2011, p. 614)

What are we to make of this recommendation that the expectation of play ought to be the dominant logic of education? Or rather, what subject matters and topics risk being whitewashed for the sake of keeping the lesson pleasurable? This is an area in significant need of future research.

Taking up the above question, or that of any other, however, must always be informed by the technological form of digital play that I sought to outline in this dissertation, specifically in Chapter Two. That is, we remain unable to grasp the essence of digital play unless we consider its operation throughout the circulation of its various mechanisms: producers, consumers, content, infrastructure, political economies, and ecologies. If we are to understand and intervene upon the contemporary operation of digital play, then we must aim to engage with this technology in its totality. It is not enough, for instance, to advocate for the increased presence of women as content producers in the video game industry, if the addition of women in and of itself does nothing to change the often sexist and racist content of contemporary digital play (Lalley, 2005). As James Green, art director for Titan Studios, wondered in response to the criticism his company’s game, Fat Princess (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2009a), received regarding the sexist and problematic body images found within the game (the premise is to fatten one’s princess so as to make it difficult for opposing players to kidnap her; see Figure 6.1): “Does it
make it better or worse that the concept artist (who designed the look, characters, everything) is a girl?” (qtd. in R. Nelson, 2008). Likewise, I would suggest, that it is not enough to advocate for the virtues of educational gaming without also considering the totality of digital play. We must, in other words, seek to understand not just the content of educational gaming—nor even how the form of digital play effects the pedagogy of the subject matter selected—but also the various substructures that allow for educational gaming to come into existence in the first place; that is, we must hold educational gaming accountable for its connection to the maquiladoras of Mexico, the sweatshops of China, and the mines of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This subject of educational gaming, hence, is in significant need of future critical cultural analysis, of the kind I have advocated for here.
I wish to conclude with a note explicitly acknowledging my own anxieties and desires for the future of digital play, and, by extension, game studies. Those who read this dissertation without knowing me will be surprised, perhaps, for I am what most people would consider an avid gamer. I was born in 1982, and came of age at the moment when Nintendo and Sega were actively working to produce the precursors of today’s hardcore gamer. Some of my fondest memories are playing games, such as *Earthbound* (Nintendo, 1994/1995) and *Final Fantasy VI* (Square, 1994). I believed then, and I continue to believe now, that those games were works of art, masterpieces even, that would hold up well against the works produced in other, more established media.

Why then, so much pessimism? Why then, have I opted not to touch upon those moments of hope that are to be found within the domain of digital play? For surely, as I have argued, gaming has something to say to the anxieties and desires of contemporary society; and thus, the fact that digital play resonates so strongly with so many across the globe, might it not also hold out some promise for those who engage with it? Perhaps, and I remain hopeful that it does. And yet, if it indeed does, it must do so throughout the totality of its operation. We cannot smile at the pleasures afforded for us through the experience of digital play and simultaneously remain ignorant of the significant suffering undertaken on our behalf. Players the world over are noted to have cried when witnessing Aerith Gainsborough die in *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) (IGN Staff, 2012a). This says something. Players the world over are not noted to have cried nor even cared when reports of the kidnappings, rapes, and deaths associated with working at the Maquiladoras of Mexico and elsewhere first broke news in the mid-1990s. This says something too. For the sake of the future of digital play, in its totality, I have chosen to listen.
Notes:

\[liii\] This initial dissertation proposal was rejected by my department. Portions of it, however, live on in Chapter Five, when I discuss the cultural influence of Christian eschatology on contemporary secular society.

\[liv\] Though not always, for just as overtime one comes to dread turning the next page of a book, so too does one learn to dread the beginning of another level of a game.
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